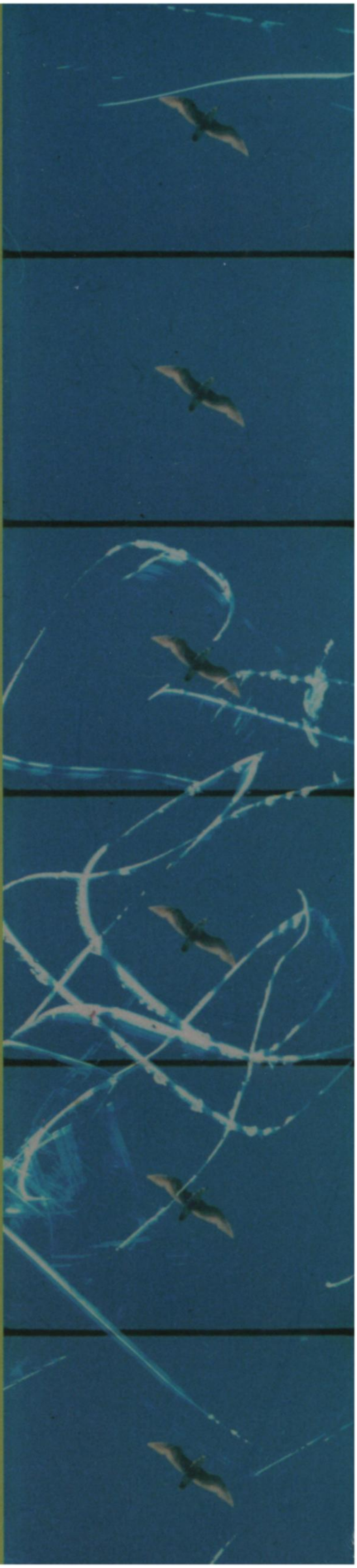
STAN BRAKHAGE:
CORRESPONDENCES



CHICAGO REVIEW
47:4 WINTER 2001
48:1 SPRING 2002
EIGHT DOLLARS

CHICAGO REVIEW

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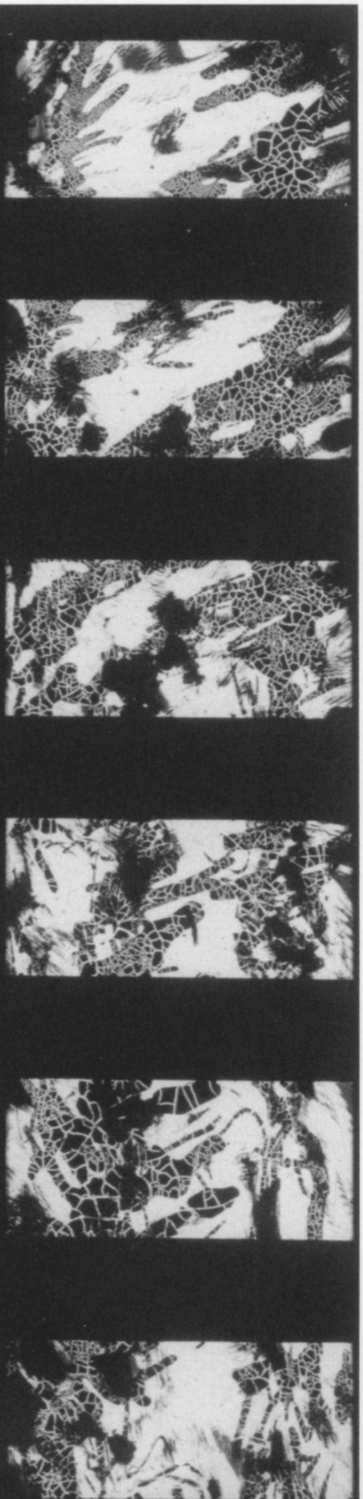
STAN BRAKHAGE:
CORRESPONDENCES



Introduction

Over the past fifty years Stan Brakhage has forcefully expanded the boundaries of film, turning it into a medium that can sustain intensive epistemological inquiry and visionary insight. In his first book, *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), he wrote, "I suggest there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word." This capacious commitment to perception has licensed Brakhage to eschew plot and the other various "props" the movies seem unable to move without. In their place, he's cultivated a panoply of tactics that force us to reimagine both how we watch film and what it is we do when we "see" anything.

Although his output in the 1990s was bookended by two major photographic series (*Visions in Meditations* and the "Vancouver Island Trilogy"), for most of that decade he set his camera aside and made his films by painting and etching directly onto the film strip (a technique he's employed off-and-on since the early 1960s). The result is an extensive body of work (over six hours, by my estimate) that intransigently frustrates the mimetic habits we've been slipped into by "the movies," and reorients his audience to the elemental roles that light and time play in film. In the 1996 essay, "In Consideration of Aesthetics" (reprinted below), Brakhage writes, "I am primarily interested in the aesthetic possibilities of the medium, and these are those which promote mental reflection (rather than reflective recollection)." And as with most of his films, these handpainted works summon a proprioceptive acuity that balances sensation with reflection. Even the quietest of them springs the lock of passive entertainment (a word whose etymology aptly indicates the captivity involved in its consumption), and activates "the optical mind" in an adventure of perception.

Brakhage's explorations of the "aesthetic possibilities" of film are complemented by an extensive body of writing. Although his lifelong ambition as a filmmaker has been to achieve a visionary mode of cognition free from language (what he calls "moving visual thought"), Brakhage has nevertheless recognized the utility of language to his project: "I have found, across years of photography and editing, that the verbal can open into the visual, like a swing gate in the mind, or sprung door, revealing plethoras of inexplicable and often utterly unexpected visitations" (quoted from "Having declared a belief in God...," reprinted below). Brakhage's thought is singularly complex and recursive, and his prose (as Ed Dorn once observed) is "outlandishly accurate." His writing reveals that he is deeply invested in a particular tradition of U.S. poetry. Brakhage possesses Stein's metaphysical wit and Pound's intellectual appetite; he shares Olson's commitment to "proprioception," and is preoccupied with what Duncan called "the truth of life in myth." As his first two books, *Metaphors on Vision* and *Brakhage Scrapbook*,[1] demonstrate, a good deal of this writing has occurred in the course of his extensive correspondences with poets: both books include letters from Brakhage to Robert Creeley, Guy Davenport, Ed Dorn, Robert Duncan, Robert Kelly, Michael McClure, Charles Olson, and others.

Since the material collected in this issue includes letters and essays by Brakhage, conversations with or about Brakhage, and essays on Brakhage by filmmakers, poets, and scholars, a more narrowly precise subtitle would read something like, "correspondence, conversation, aesthetics, and analysis." But a broader-gauged definition of "correspondence"—"the adaptation, relation, or agreement of things to each other"—arguably comprehends these senses. It also has the virtue of covertly including the notion of "response," which is what roughly half of this section consists of. Four Brakhage scholars—Fred Camper, Marie Nesthus, John Pruitt, and P. Adams Sitney—have contributed substantial new essays on material ranging from the 1971

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[1] *Metaphors on Vision*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, collects material from the 1950s and early 1960s, and was published as *Film Culture* 30 in 1963; the *Brakhage Scrapbook*, ed. Robert A. Haller (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1982) collects material from the mid-1960s into the 1970s. Important selections from both books, along with several new essays from the 1990s, have been reprinted in *Essential Brakhage* (Documentext, 2001).

"Pittsburgh Trilogy" to the "Vancouver Island Trilogy" of the 1990s. And four writers who have been involved with Brakhage—Guy Davenport, Robert Kelly, Michael McClure, and Kristin Prevallet—have contributed essays, a translation, and a conversation. The section is rounded out with essays by filmmakers Nathaniel Dorsky and Jennifer Reeves. Each of these ten pieces reflects the intensity of engagement that Brakhage's films inspire; as a group they point to new directions for critical responses to his work.

If we count the 1971 "Document" letters to Creeley, Dorn, and others that are quoted extensively in Marie Nesthus's article, this issue covers writing by Brakhage from each of the last five decades. The several letters to Duncan reproduced here commence with Brakhage's arrival in New York in 1954 after living in San Francisco with Duncan and Jess Collins in the early 1950s; the letters to Olson describe Brakhage's working practices and his environs in Colorado in the mid-1960s; the letters to Ronald Johnson, all from 1990, begin as postcards and then expand into a fuller exposition and clarification of Brakhage's aesthetics *vis à vis* Johnson's, which the two continue to discuss in their 1997 conversation. This issue also includes Brakhage's account of meeting Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky in 1983; five essays on aesthetics from the column entitled "Time...en dit" that Brakhage wrote in the 1990s for the Canadian journal *Musicworks*; and an essay on three poets that Brakhage wrote last year specifically for this issue.

Although he is rightly known best for the 370-some films he has made, Brakhage is also one of our most articulate aestheticians. His ability to navigate between the verbal and the visual arts should remind both Brakhage's audience and the audiences of the poets he's been involved with of the correspondences between these media; it is the aim of this issue to stimulate more of exactly these kinds of border-crossing considerations.

§

All of the contributors to this section, including and especially Stan Brakhage, have been enthusiastic and patient collaborators in this project, and I thank them all for sharing their remarkable energy and passion. Several other people must be thanked for their instrumental roles in this issue's execution. My fellow editors at *CR* deserve a medal for indulging me in this "small special section," and in lending a hand to help accommodate the issue once it had blossomed to its present proportions. Karin Nisenbaum transcribed the correspondence with characteristic good humor and good will. Rutherford Witthus, Curator of Literary and Natural History Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, was an early supporter of the project, and lent an invaluable hand by supplying us with digital copies of the letters to Duncan and Olson. Special thanks to Anthology Film Archives for permission to use the stills and photos on pages. 14, 15, 126, 135, 144, 199. The remainder of the stills and the color strips were made by Fred Camper on very short notice and with almost unbelievable generosity. For technical and intellectual assistance, I also want to thank John Beer, Brian Bress of Soft Robot Design, Monique DiDonna, Ken Eisenstein, Patrick Friehl, Tom Gunning, Paul Hornschemeier of Westcan Printing Group, Peter Hutton, Devin Johnston, Bruce MacPherson, Peter O'Leary, Jeffrey Skoller, Kristoffer and Benjamin Steinhoff, and Hannah Woodroofe.

A word about "stills": the images peppered throughout this issue are to remind the reader that visual phenomena are under discussion, even though their very name—"stills"—admits the futility of any faithful representation of Brakhage's "moving visual thought." An extensive collection of color stills and strips from many of the films discussed here is available online at Fred Camper's website: http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/BrakhageS.html.

Eirik Steinhoff
February 12, 2002

Frequently cited works:

BS	*Brakhage Scrapbook* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1983)
CCC	*Canyon Cinema Catalogue*, available online at http://www.canyoncinema.com
EB	*Essential Brakhage* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 2001)

STAN BRAKHAGE to ROBERT DUNCAN & JESS COLLINS

Somedate eve [1954]

Dear Robert and Jess,

Thanks—for the letters giving shock and excitement. Everything is happening and it's all wonderful, thunderful also. Majorca!—eureka!—I'm delighted for the both of you, meaning I'm glad for you and also sad dimmed a bit at the thought of your going so far away. But never mind that. You know that one of my most bothersome habits is that of holding onto the memory of something as remaining the way it was when it isn't anymore. I do worry about the cats, though, and the place which I had always said I would hold down for you if ever you should have to go away. That, of course, is now out of the question (and, most certainly, out of the answer) and, anyhell, all of this is out of the present Brakhage character which doesn't even move from place to place, anymore, but moves to be moving. Rest assured of this—I will have some sort of a roof to put over your heads when you arrive in N.Y.—and that goes for good old Harry, too. But, you must keep me informed as to date because it will require some conniving on my part to provide said ceiling. And, I won't elaborate anymore on the present Brakhage character because I don't think he has one anymore—I think he's suddenly become a character, which is a confusement that is exciting. I breath...it's full of wonder-ment, wonderful. Enough! You'll be seeing me soon enough; and I'm grateful that we will be together again before you begin your Spanish adventure. Let me know when you are coming, how things are going—etcetera.

As to my chronology: I moved into a place on 72nd, found Cage and Varese had left for Europe, settled down to wait for their return and to see what I could do... Went over to Virginia Admiral's for dinner, mentioned that I'd like to get to Europe; and she suggested I try for Fulbright as a cinema artist from Colo. Disinterestedly I applied (on the last day possible for next year—starting Sept '55) and found my chances were very good if I would put down Italy as a choice and invent some bullshit about why I wanted to go there...which I did. Won't know whether I get it until April. Because of no college, I needed 3 good letters of recommendation from people with names in the field of film. Amos Vogel wrote one (I've found him to be a money-bags man looking for so called "shocking" movies of which I had 2 that shock-pleased him, "Desistfilm" and "The Way to Shadow Garden,"—he's to cinema what Laughlin is to poetry) Parker Tyler wrote the second (I found him nobel and delightful and liked him, loaned him some of your poems for reading) and Hans Richter wrote the third (he was so impressed with my films that I'm now working with him on the sound track of his new film "Not For Sale" which he's been working on for the past 2 yrs with Cocteau, Tanguy, Duchamp, Milhaud, Arp, Max Ernst, Paul Bowles, etc. etc.—can't say I'm too impressed with Richter, though,—he seems totally unaware of what he's doing and overly-impressed with all the big, star-studded names he's doing it with). In the process of showing my films around, Ian Hugo saw them. I, somehow, didn't remember him and spent 1 hr. and a half talking with Anais Nin before I realized she wasn't just Mrs. Hugo. From the way she desires to be adored, I'm surprised she didn't scratch my eyes out for said faux-pas, but she seems to have taken to liking from this licking and I've found her rather sweet. I went to a show of Henry Miller's water colors with her and was disgusted by all the weeping done over poor old starving Miller. I read one chapter of Miss Nin's writing and I probably won't get around to reading more. She doesn't have much to say about you, Robert,—what happened?, as if I couldn't guess. I run into people everywhere here in N.Y. that either know you, Robert, or your writing. You're better known here than in S.F. Everyone wants to know what you're doing—for instance, the husband of Denise Levertov, somebody called M.C. who's a friend of the editor of Origin and connected with Black Mtn Press; and, oh hell, I can't remember names—they've been flying at me too thick and fast. Anyhow, you'll have a chance to renew acquaintances yourself, soon—those you want to, that is.

Last act, and then I must run. I went down and got a job at the biggest advertising joint in N.Y., Benton and Bowles, to run a photostat machine. The next morn I said, "O hell" and quit because I wanted to. $200 bucks a month flew out the window and I flew down to the Bowery where I'm living in 1/2 of a burned out building (my half is livable) where I can stay rent free until the other half is repaired—which may be never. There's lots of room and extra beds, and I have friends beside, so fear not for me nor for the roof which I've promised when you arrive. I'm accomplishing the most impossible trick of all: besides just feeding myself, I'm making movies without having a single stable cent to my name. How? Actors are paying me in order to have the opportunity of working with me on experimental films. Actors are paying me! Imagine it—I can't quite. I don't know how long it will last, but it's great for the moment. Tomorrow I see Cage.

Write soon—

Love, / Stan

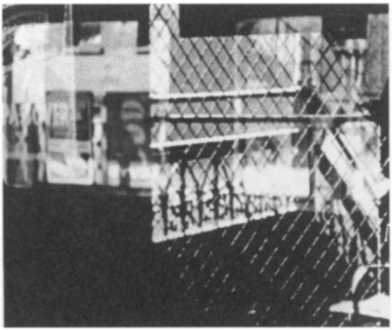
§

June 27, 1957

Dear, Dear Robert and Jess,

I have written you twice within the last six eight months and addressed the letters hopefully to 1724 Baker Street, somehow being unable to believe that there wouldn't be some lonely angel still there to forward the mail. Now Windy writes and tells me you haven't heard from me at all. Here's again then... And let us always try to keep some good words between us. I know I am to blame in the lack of communications—you wrote me twice from Europe and I never answered. Please forgive. I was on the way to hell in that time and consuming past, present, and future.

I don't know how I could ever tell all that's happened to me since I saw you last—yet I know when I hear from you I will very much want some description of your happenings... The important thing is to try and give you some idea of what's happening in my films. You have, thank heavens, seen the beginnings of what is now growing into an incredible world of films for me. "The Wonder Ring" started out to be a chore of collecting some footage on the Third Avenue El before it was destroyed. Joseph Cornell supplied the footage—I being in my most broke period in N.Y. at that time. From the moment of "The Wonder Ring" onward my entire film vision transformed. It was a long time before I had any relation to the change, one of those frightening times when everything turns moonwise inside and the outside wars with it fiercely. My outsides used to die tough in those days, leaving the god damndest unburnable corpse every time. "Nightcats" comes somewhere in mid change, beginning as a kind of continuation of something stumbled on in the cat sequence of "In Between". It began with my seeing the black cat as the night, everything of the cat world being created out of him and returning into him—dreamed of first as simple color happening, then becoming color and form, and finally perfected to his very movements, there being not one rythmn in the entire film which isn't as intricately vital as an entity in a theme and variations in music. "The Wonder Ring" has this in terms of returning color, creating (for me) a merry-go-round of the experience of riding on the "El", but "WR" has nowhere the intricate perfection of "NC". Now I have just finished "Loving", the third in this which might be called a series—two lovers in a world of moving ground, trees, sun—the human drama coming back into my work directly, beautifully... Will fire a print out to Larry as soon as possible so that all you can see it.



The Wonder Ring

My personal history these last several years has been stormy enough to make the most hectic moments from the grand San Francisco time seem rock calm—the nostalgia for those warm afternoons of wonderment reading between cups of Oolong Tea in the orange room (how I've yearned for the sound of your voice, dear Jess, to lift me into a children's world I never had as a child) and the evenings, the artichoke suppers, curried rice, the long table talks which would often last till bedtime (how often I've needed desperately the example of your creative energy, dear Robert, which used once to sweep the clap-trap world of triviality beyond star's reach in an instant and hold it at bay well into my own night's sleep).

I've been through times more deadly than I'd ever believed a world could afford. New York has nearly killed me twice now, first the summer after you left, the "Last Resort", a recreation center in Catskill's which wanted to trade food to the hungry starving dog just to have "real live artist" around and reduced me to screaming wreck within a week, followed by the mad woman on Long Island, and lastly the appendicitus complicated by malnutrition which left me two months in the very hospital where I remembered, when well trapped within it, your warning of all the artists who had died there, one killed by orange juice forced down in by nuns when his stomach was separated from his intestines, etc., and how I should (if ever hit by car) fight to be left in the street rather than be taken to this hospital. Well, I somehow survived. Larry must have told you some of the gory details of that ghastly summer. Finally, too weak, too sick in every way to take the Fulbright—the inevitable retreat to Denver. The reign of the gang well over, Larry broken up into little pieces rushing off to the Merchant Marines, Windy (at that time) three-fourths dead and one-fourth hypocrite, the King-pin collapsed under every crown he ever wore, and Yvonne gone—last chapter mad Saturday when Yvonne's husband-to-be took me on typical Chicago, thirties, gangster "last ride" which I got out of by talking as mile-a-minute as he was driving. Then all deadly thoughts—a back-to-college ending unfinished and trading for a trip-to-Hollywood (why must I always actualize everything and play it out in order to see I don't want what I can't). Larry's probably also given you some of the Rohauer story as he was mixed up in the devastating end of that one, it's good being that it cured me once for all of my artistly crippling form-a-movement self, the medicine killing the patience to cure the disease. Did then there though make the greatest of the what may be seen as American avant-guarde and/or experimental film "Flesh of Morning"—I mean the end there and manage to attain it—it being, by that time, a game something like competition in sports. Another collapse, though—back to Denver...another reason now, all this time there being a love growing in me and also an enemie in me growing against that love, sending me off to New York

Flesh of Morning

once more to slay the dreadful dragon. But the clever son-of-a-bitch crawled right up inside me again where I be damned if I could get at it. Six months and back to Denver with a dangerous case of "pernicious anemia". Months of pills and building. I have now a secure $375.00 a month job, a beautiful small house to myself, my first real home, a garden which I tend, a car which I somehow manage to drive, and my love whom I have just this week proposed to. She is an actress, one of the greatest for her age I've ever seen. We will be soon then returning together to New York to live in house in Flushing, near Joseph Cornell, I to be eight-hour government film job all day, and my night-self at night, making my films as I here made "Loving" with enough of money to really afford my unfortunately expensive art, and enough of wisdom at least to know life, and enough of love to live it, she to continue her career the only place, again unfortunately, where she can, and the two of us together to begin what I now see as the real adventure, the only one which lasts forever and withstands all. Meantime, I'm beginning a feature film in color, a film of the night—all the night, dreams, beings, in light of the moon, the pieces of arts the lines of neons, the gardens of children and lovers, the destructions and the suicide of sleep as death...indescribable.

Please let me know how you are—what you're doing—and some poems, Robert, please... And, Jess, I read all Morgenstern poems with Lynn and Morton just last night—a beautiful evening you gave to us.

Love, / Stan

§

Crisman / Salina Star Route / Boulder, Colorado
June 8, 1962

Dear Robert and Jess,

I have just burned close to a hundred letters-to-be-answered which had piled up within the last year. And now there is just about one more letter I want to write—and that is to both of you...and in grateful thanks for all that you both have, again, done for me. Bless you. You are each incredible magicians; and when you are together, the spell is of such majestic beauty to me as to be 'indescribable': the word I use when my feelings tend to such a depth and complexity as to be beyond all my abilities with language and into the area where only some future visual expression may find its source, or inspiration, there.

This entire last year, I now realize, I have been side-tracked, detoured, from all moving centers within myself—and all by the same old game which I thought, so surely, I had come to terms with. It all started when I took my lecture tour to New York, last fall—or rather, I think, when I finished "The Prelude" a year ago at this time. There was then a collapse of all working process; and, by fall, a desperate desire to (I thought) renew old acquaintances (but actually) to be recognized, etcetera...thus New York, and all "new" associations, unlimited correspondences, a hidden drive for fame which was (just as secretly) driving a wedge between the working center of activity in myself and all my senses. Or to put it, as Gertrude Stein does so beautifully in "Lectures in America", I lost all sense of talking and listening at the same time. And how could I?, I keep asking myself these last several days (I who have been thru that old ratty-race around the million wheel), how could I have cultivated such a blind spot? (while hippo-critically yacket-ty-yacketing about "vision" in one lecture hall after another all year long.) And this all motivated the drive to bring Broughton, Cage-Cunningham-Tudor, yourselves, and Creeley, etcetera, "to this area", as I put it at the time...devoting months of effort to being a Rocky Mountain entrepreneur of an "Art" series, yes with a capital "A", and inaugurating the entire "record" series, etcetera. Ah but, and here is the beauty of it, while I was not enough "with" the others to see much more than their "playing the roll of it" (being stage symbol, etc.) you, Robert, and you, Jess, were most real to me while you were here; and, later Bob and Bobbie Creeley (arriving just on my return from madness of S.F. week) became dear friends to this whole family, the grove we are making, the roots and branches of each of us, and our sources of nourishment...and there was such joy again in this household, for that brief time of their stay here, that nothing could ever make me forget it. Both of you had, in so many ways, made me feel the seeds of doubt, and thus doubt my drives of the time, wonder whether I was being driven and by what; and in all your spell, the graceful uninterference of each of your senses of self-containment, you raised this now-cherished, but then disturbing, wonderment within me. But I seemed to have to run-on-in-my-ways awhile (all of S.F. intervening, then a flight to Ann Arbor, etcetera); but then Jane, I, and all the children drove together down to stay a week with the Creeley's. And "the figure of Outward" broke all binding helped the sliver of glass, restored perspective...he is such a wonder and joy.

Well, this has turned more into a letter of explanations rather than the simple thankyou intended; and perhaps the larger part of it is written to help me set my own thoughts in order. It doesn't really matter. I am very much at work again, for the first time in almost a year; and the house is filled with a new growing happiness and a reaching out to the sun, and the summer, and to all becoming. And for whatever you have done to help us (the visual image most clearly in mind is the most-raised eye-brows, and questioning forehead lines above them, of Jess in answer to some of my sayings of that time) I send you whatever joy of it I can in a letter...and the blessings of all of us.

It is possible, tho' by no means sure, that I may travel to San Francisco again within the summer. If so, it will be a time turned from means and ends to beginnings. Even in James Broughton's apartment there is a Jess Collins blessing, the painting with the man, the woman, the tree, being, of all, creation—and what was most magically for me, hanging naturally above the studio-couch on which I slept while there. If only, then, I had been more living out of the present—such a beautiful word...present. The sense of it being, now to me, more beautiful than "to look forward." Oh my, and just that—I'm going on and on, as if afraid to let go the last letter for awhile.

Until, whenever it is, I see you,

Best, / Stan.

§

June 21, 1962

Dear Robert,

I assume that when Creeley wrote of my "care of terms" he was writing of an "attempt" on my part rather than any real "accomplishment." However, I am much disturbed when I see what I have written to you and Jess (when it comes back quoted in your letter), at the lack of care or (wondering how I could not, or at least didn't, recognize this lack when writing to you) want of responsibility in the writing. And then, as Jane says: "You always seem to be tongue-tied in the presence of Robert, to say or write just exactly the wrong thing...that is, something which you, as you ordinarily write and speak, couldn't possibly mean," I wonder if I'm not refusing consciousness in your presence. I have excused this awkwardness with yourself, in discussing it with Jane, by attributing it to shyness; but I am afraid there is something more belligerent which has been unconsciously operative. It is (I want to write "as if") that I have gone out of my usual way to annoy you (most especially, as cover up, with "The rank abuse of praise") while consciously excusing myself to you with continual phrases disclaiming my responsibility for my words and actions—ah, there it is: "words and actions", that is, even in this letter where I am struggling to take response-ability, seem to pretend the writing and speaking of words to be other than an action...what other? I do not ordinarily write to two friends at once; so that even "Dear Robert and Jess" seems to me, now, the choosing of a form which would not allow me to be consciously writing in response at all. I ordinarily take responsibility, to such an extent that I consider "The struggle to", or even "to make a point of" as I am here doing, as being not only prefaces to the "taking" but even substitutes for the action itself. When I am here where I am, the "taking" and the "ability" are fore granted—I respond naturally with care. Your letter indicates your memory of this quality in our relationship—no, wrong terminology—of this responsibility of mine. I accept: "Isn't it that you are disturbed about us and that flooding out what we are with over-feelings seems to make a close bond possible?" Yes, but consciously I know that no bond is thus possible. Creeley has a good answer to lack-of-responsibility in another: "That's your problem." That I here-now accept also; and I will not burden you with careless writing in the future, tho' I trust you will forgive mistakes—not meaning, by "forgive", that you should overlook them anymore than you have in your last letter.

Of the three film-makers which you mention in your letter, I am the most related to Eisenstein. You refer to his art as: "simplistic and shallow but energetic and even violent." It may surprise you to find me in agreement with that statement. What led me to such an agreement, after an initial reflection, was a careful consideration of your use of the terms. Such consideration led me further—to an acceptance that I also "had never had the impression that (my) vision (or Eisenstein's) compared in depth and complexity with...Cocteau or Bergman." And this is a surprise and a joy. I am freed, in this realization, not only from being hung up on toteming but from closeted viewing—that is, I now newly feel as if I might see a Bergman film as it is rather than as an example, for instance, of even depth and complexity. I know that when I write: "most related to Eisenstein": I mean that he has taught me the most—a confusion of terms. Certainly of all poets you have taught me the most; but this does not make me related to you or your poetry as I kept insisting, to your justified annoyance, when you were visiting here. (Perhaps I will be most benefitted in my future seeing of Eisenstein, as a result of consideration of your use of terms.) (Ah, I see a lack of care here—it is certainly not your "use of" but your "care of" terms which has moved me; and it is my careless use of terms, or at best confusion, which has caused me to construct utterly personal and uncommunicative hierarchies, limiting my ability to perceive a work, such as Bergman's "Seventh Seal", or a person, for what it or he really is.) I certainly never thought of you as "teacher", and always knew perfectly well that you would reject such a term, when I was living at 1724 Baker. After my experiences at Dartmouth, I asked and answered for myself something akin to Gertrude Stein's : "Why is it that no preachers, no teachers, no orators, no parliamentary debaters ever have any ideas after the age of thirty-five? It is because when they talk they only hear what the audience is hearing. They get mixed up in their head and think that it is possible for one person to agree totally with another person; and when you think that you are lost and never have any ideas an more."

The depth and complexity of my vision is not comparable to that of Bergman. What I had done was to narrow, personalize, the word "vision", to render it meaningless in relation to the films of Bergman, or in fact to leave it with meaning only in reference to my own work and, only secondarily, to the work of (for instance) Eisenstein. I think that all "use of" words tends to such dictatorship. Your statement: "Feelings take on depth and complexity only in language": applies here, if I understand you correctly, because "feelings" is a word. There are less words in all my work than in the total work of any other filmmaker known to me. How could I, who have many times answered, when asked for a statement on my films ("The title of the film is the only statement I care to make on the film") have attempted to usurp terms to define my work at the expense of their rightful meanings in relation to the work of poets of the film such as Cocteau and Bergman? And I, too, find Eisenstein shallow (I would formerly have said "embarrassing") and simplistic (I question "energetic and violent" in this context) in all the drama developing thru language in his work. I do not find any of these terms applicable to any of those qualities in his work which are independent of language, drama, etc.—those moments not "out of context" but rather "other than context"...if I may, admittedly, use a term—albeit with care. I will try to write about these, which seem to me at this time almost "indefinable", qualities which I find in Eisenstein if you think it worth the while, and if you will permit a use of language for description, in the sense of "about", defining the area.

The exchange of letters between Jerome Rothenberg and Robert Creeley (in Kulchur 6) has helped me to consider your terms, the insistance (there) of "image" as a word, particularly Rothenberg's "The deep image is the content of vision emerging in the poem" and Creeley's*: "Duncan in a letter somewhere—asked how we'd distinguish the poem from any other visions? I think we would, of course, almost too simply, 'because the poem is the vision of a poet,' i.e. by here reintroducing the concept of the Maker": and then later: "shouldn't you take it as far as Stein did?": with that preceeding "if" somehow clarifying my own difficulties in first reading your letter. Thank you for all caution sent with such love as to overcome those difficulties of mine.

Stan

P.S. Jane was emotionally disturbed over the references to Eisenstein as "simplistic and shallow"; and tho' she acknowledged that the dramatic and linguistic threads of his "Ivan The Terrible", for instance, might be considered such, she kept insisting that the work "Ivan The Terrible" as a whole was deep and complex. I replied that, if one is using language to describe all that in Eisenstein which is least related to language, one might describe him as visually complex and deep. One might, and this one has, by the same use of language describe Bergman's work as visually shallow. But, I argued, if one is taking care with terms to the point of recognizing "deep and complex" as language, recognizing "visually" and "shallow" as words, etc., even while using them; then one (at least this one) recognizes "'Ivan The Terrible' as a whole" as an indefinable experience except as it relates to language: simplistic and shallow: whereas Bergman's "Seventh Seal" is: deep and complex. That is not to say that one couldn't use language to describe the indefinable; but words like "deep", "complex", "shallow", "beautiful", "majestic", etcetera, would be of very little use in this, precisely because they are such definitive words, tending to contain all description within the word itself.

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* In a postcard to Duncan dated June 22, 1962, Brakhage writes: "I see in re-reading the Kulchur correspondences, I have credited Creeley with a quote which was actually Rothenberg's..." [Ed.]

Jane says: "I think you should use 'filmically' instead of 'visually'", and the first is certainly less historically, that is poetically, charged than the second; but just because of that it seems nebulous, almost meaningless, in comparison to the second. I had thought that my work was giving "film" its meaning; but I now feel as if only the poet—or what speaks thru the poet—can give the century-old technological use of the word a charged definition—no, I'm confused here... again into the areas of "use of", the job of the dictionary-makers, etcetera...and in any other sense "filmically" is too definitive for descriptive use in an area as unrelated to language as that being considered. The medium of film? Those strips of celluloid capable of recording stage drama, all forms of, the soundtrack capable of recording music, poetry—all these, and etcetera (including records, animated or not, of drawing, painting)...all these I've considered "uses of" the medium. But film, technologically, of necessity transforms the drama being recorded, the painting being presented, etcetera...here where my use of "care of terms in the medium of film" enters in and helps describe the indefinable area of film where Bergman is "careless." I suddenly realize that language, spoken or written, could technically be presented by way of the medium of film WITHOUT transformation, except in so far as the occasion of the presentation would transform the language (that is, the being in a darkened place of viewing, say, a poem on a screen, etc.) Then there's the medium of film as it is to me when I'm working with it, always less and less involved with any "use of", it (some indefinable it) eschewing even my "care of" (eschewing? what shall I write?)...as you write in your letter of your own processes (no, no "own", no "processes", just happenings) when I have "no deep and complex feelings, no 'I' at all that does not belong to, arise in the orders of—" the film itself (I mean the strips of film and what moves me of what's been to begin to splice what is to be, or ((if I hesitate)) thru its insistance upon what has to be)...but "the film itself" is not really comparable to "the poem itself"; and as I am writing "about", I cannot help but "use terms." Do you understand?

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Late Sept; 1966

Dear Robert,

Thank you for Passages "Of The War"—I have had "Up Rising" on the wall of my work-room for months, now: and Creeley sent me photostats of the Passages printed in "Poetry": but the clarity you offer of "The Soldiers" comes to me in necessary/good time here where I am now editing images of crowd shapes and formations of armies, movements thereof, from the newsreels of the '30's, working along a line of the Greek sense of the word "idea" ("picture"/"pattern") to work these semblances of the war of my childhood's-weekly-attendence into a strip of film that will now reveal the shape, the taking shape of 'World' conflict and (as these come now thru my memory as thru my hands) the physiological rhythms of my inner conflict remembered, pieced together, spliced. I hope these parts of "23rd Psalm Branch" to take their continuities as current reflection of the child's view of images of war—to be of the very rhythm the optic nerve pulses in its firing forth these pictures dredged from memory fund, and to be of the orders of that act of remembering...this is the closest I am enabled to come, at this time, to make visible the being of war's cause. You do inform me well as to why the T.V. screen will not yield material for this insight, tho' I would hope, in time (as I become attuned to my own nerve's impulse in the immediate sensory receiving of images—as distinct from memories' receipt) to break thru even the subversion of "the Advertiser"...or, perhaps, that some child will. But you do give me most hope in the part of Passages 27, beginning "so that the stone...", for I do live/work in the belief now that the sun inside me does naturally make of these "dirty papers"/ pictures all of illumination needed for a man's growth of thought-feeling if he do but attend the reflection and be given the will to hold "sight steady." It is a task I would never have consciously thought to be chosen by (I was, when interrupted by all this, working on a film called "Scenes From Under Childhood"): but the atmosphere of Viet Nam War somehow reached even this wilderness of our living and called forth, or was made-up-of, all of war within me: and I have been working some 7 or 8 months now on "23RD PSALM BRANCH", an hour's worth of it now completed. I have never before felt as lonely in my living as I have since beginning this work—have felt it difficult to come to speech, and have only lately been moved to write letters again to friends. Your Passages have helped to sustain me all along. I was mostly plagued by some foolish fear that it was no 'proper' work for me, that the task was a distraction from what I took to be my 'real' work, that it was impossible to make of this (at beginning, so-much-subject-matter) a work of art. Jane finally said to me: "Don't ask yourself if it is a 'work of art', by your previous definitions, but only if it is necessary": and then I could come to read the quoted section of Passage 23 beginning "Motherly Angels" with prayerful clarity for work's continuance: and I wonder, now, who's quote it is, how it came to be written—but, no matter...it has served me well.

Myrrena and Crystal are both in school and making something of it with strength. Neowyn is now 'the big girl of the house,' holding most of the children's day in her charge. Rarc is now old enough that he and Bearthm are very much brothers together. We have a donkey named Rosco, and our dog Durin, still, and a new canary named "Feather": and it is beautiful here. Best to you and Jess.

Joy to you, / Stan.

STAN BRAKHAGE to CHARLES OLSON

Brakhage / Box # 554 / Rollinsville, Colo.
August 21, 1964

Dear Charles,

Imagine a ghost town in high mountains, a town which once had population of over 2000 gold-diggers and whatever family some managed to bring with them. Image shacks tents holes in the ground, stacks of cut trees, fuss of it all. Seventy years later there's nothing left of it BUT: The Postman, very retired now and living in one of the three still-standing shacks, holes caving in on themselves, street-signs completely surrounded by aspen and new spruce, AND the cabin of the only man who apparently came with home in mind and built to last and of a spirit fit for growth, as it has a 1913 addition of kitchen-dining room made of telephone poles and a much newer, 1950's, children's quarters which can only be entered thru a 4 foot tall doorway leading to two rooms, modern bath and utility room at far end of hallway's wind. And, as this is a TRUE story, the cabin is the home of The Brakhages, AND, I am writing you from the UPPER story, the single room, of the 1890's, my first workroom all to myself; and I am overlooking my children playing and the green green trees and backgrounding mountains of The Continental Divide. Off to the right somewhere, out of sight, is a giant steamshovel used in making The Panama Canal, come to its last ditch here, rusting away into it; and I think we very much feed off the atmosphere of a ghost town such as this where all of gold-grub has so obviously failed, only household & Postman survived, all leaded glass turned, oxidized, purple in the sun (for our stained-glass window), oar buckets, shovels, etc., rusted to rock-look (fit pieces of great beauty hold wood dry for us, serve as planters, children's toys, etc.). There is a great rock fireplace around which this cabin IS; and a lovely old wood & coal burning stove named ALCAZAR: but the house is also equipped with gas range, space heaters, etc. We watch the moon and the stars, take pictures (for "Night Blooming" film I'm making) thru large windows recently placed in the walls. The house is old and new at once and everywhere in it; and we are very happy here.

We have a new baby boy, born Aug. 15th, at 3:15 in the early lovely morning, born to the sounds of my 8mm camera (I work in that less expensive medium almost entirely now, being now more "amateur" than ever) and Bach harpsichord music from our portable phonograph smuggled into the hospital; and he was born as gently as the moon from clouds, Jane easily delivering and in complete control, and born flowing long (2 inch) black hair, looking on the world from gray-green eyes, intense centered expression softening into lines of beseeming sensitivity, a down covered body of some 7 lbs. 12 oz at birth. We named him for sun's arc or sense of the light of the sun taking shape upon the moon: Rarc Brakhage, which does also carry for me Arcana, Arcadia, Arcturus ("bear watcher"), Ar (c) thur (of Kelly's "At the foot of the Alphabet"), even, ark of tradition, bridge, Noah's even, etc; and the name does sound him very well these several days we've had him. We now have 2 boys 3 girls—a full house.

Blessings, / Stan

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Box # 554 / Rollinsville, Colo.
January 8, 1965

Dear Charles,

The taped semblance of your voice fills our house often these days—Dora lent me copy of your readings of/from "Maximus 2" (Vancouver '62.

I'm sending you copy of "Song 8", my sea-creatures song. It is yours to keep, if you like. I'm now working mostly with 8mm: the "home-movie"—AND less-expensive—medium...one of the joys of it being that I can afford to send some of these films into the very LIVING rooms of my friends, and/or/also avoid the public event scene if/and/when neccessary. So far only "Songs" in 8mm, thru "Song 10", abt an hour's worth. Thought OF same started with "Go! little naked and impudent songs", deepened SELF sense thereof with William's "No ideas but in things" (which, curiously enough seems to have originated in an early poem called "Sort of a Song"), and all play sense now PLAYED off of H.D.'s "Thoughts are things—and sometimes they are songs"...and much, of course, of "Maximus", including songs thereof. But I don't just go looking for sun's on with gee string (tho' there is a shared sense, a focus flat on perspective, which relates those works of most poets known to me when "song" is invoked in the title)—the basic source of inspiration on these recent films is any des-script which BEcomes of itself, leaving an intact sense of source, being then, in the case of film "Songs", graphic representation of move meant DIRECT; and, in that sense, I'm coming closer these days to being kinematographos: "writer of moving".

Oh, hell—I NEED a good talk with you...haven't even had a good drinking exchange since I last drank with you,* your maintenance of form thru use of alcohol (rather than being used by it) having spoiled (salvaged, that is) me from the usual such occasion. I'll be in the east thru February, Film-makers' Cinematheque setting me up for the "now you see him" sort of, so-called, "tour"..."lion feeding time" brought right into the colleges, etc. I'll try to get up to Buffalo. Where'll I find you in Buffalo, Charles?... I'm mailing this and your "Song" to Gloucester with a "please forward"—I mean, I don't even know the name of The University there—it's been a hell (I mean there before) and OF a long time since I've seen you...I mean, how ARE you?

Well, I hope this and the song get to you okay. Let me know if there's any chance of my having a show in Buffalo. I'll include the address of the Film-Maker's Cinematheque in the event there's someone there you might pass it along to apropo showing there; but please don't involve yourself in any struggle for flicks—I have the feeling I arrive most places (publically, that is) when they're about ready, unLESS I and/or someone struggle alot to get me there (in WHICH case I'm usually being there EARLY with all attendent diffiCULTties, etc.)...(as to privately arriving—ah well...different...I mean: I hope to see you soon.

Blessings, / Stan

* Brakhage's marathon meeting with Olson is described in the letter to Jane Brakhage (dated May 17, 1963) that was included as the final letter in the section of correspondence entitled "Respond Dance" that concludes *Metaphors on Vision* (*Film Culture* 30, 1963). "Respond Dance" has been reprinted in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader* (NY: Praeger, 1970), pp. 234-257. [Ed.]

July 15, '90

Dear Ronald,

It is SUCH a gift you sent and of such perfected rhythm (as "veritable" dances the mind round and breaks the/any cliche right off), so OPEN (that it begins with "that") so verbally empathetic (I can feel the pause of "sparrows"—be it AND see it—in conjunct with "hedge"... FEEL the wind against the wing on "fled", sense the 'break' of a 'flock' at the space between "fled" and "field", and swirl with "one surrounding cloud") all of which makes a "tossed world" at end of Adamspire absolutely 'at one' with the reader: you have trusted, more fully than any I know, what the language CAN, now, do—bless you. Can't write more now as we're off to Vancouver Island for 3 weeks to film the tide pools, soforth. I'm taking Ramparts with me, to be close to me in the making.

Blessings, / Stan

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Sept. 2, '90

Dear Ron,

No time to answer at length; but yes!, I DO very much enjoy 'the movies' (usually see almost everything that comes to town, including Univ. foreign movies, soforth): I don't, however find them any more related to what I'm doing than you probably would good escape fiction—in fact not even maybe as much as that because Film has almost always and only been USED to 'illustrate' other Arts, where as the distinctions between, say, Prose and Poetry have a long-standing natural History. Haven't seen Ivory's "Savages". Would like to see it. But I'm sure, were it involved with what's intrinsic to Film it could not give "answers" in the sense you suggest. I detest Bunuel (except 3 earliest films) precisely because he bends and twists (worse than Hollywood) what Film IS in order to give "answers", soforth

Blessings, / Stan

§

October 16, 1990

Dear Ronald,

In the strict sense Olson says "Myth is mouth", all his then follow-up of "Muthos" soforth, I'd take my stance that both Poetry and narrative "encompass myth", yes; but I come to this logic also along-a-line of Hollis Frampton's only finding about 5 stories in the whole history of being human: he compared them to the 5 birdsongs: (1) Good morning, (2) I found a worm, (3) Fuck me, (4) Get out, and (5) Good night. Thus I'd also have the temerity to argue with your "Poetry (in language) is where music intersects story": beautiful as that quote is, I'm surprised it comes out of you, YOUR poetry seeming, to me, to have avoided the pit falls (as I see 'em) of "story" more than usually much. It must be that you have some very elaborately fine definition of "story" which probably (from my viewpoint) gives the term too much credit. I once said that story, like melody, was unavoidable in a continuity art; but my making since then has been especially devoted to the obliteration, or at least avoidance, of story. I suppose that in this sense I'm an artist a bit like Anton Webern who composed music which seems (at his best) to turn on itself, like a mobile, and resist ALL sense of "continuity"...(although, of course, finally it must be acknowledged that his notes, too, are all in a row to be played, or studied, from beginning, thru middle, to end. Anyway, the RESISTANCE is all—or at least worth the effort inasmuch as it tests the limits of known story, melody, and so on. I personally come more and more to believe (and a belief is all I can claim for it) that a biological evolution of aesthetics (i.e. an aesthetic base on the sense organs themselves, their inner processes—rather than just the immediate reception of the external world, the fashioning input into stories, symbols, soforth/muthos) would reveal an outside limit of being human (what Olson called for, again and again, those last years) and thus a natural set of forms, therefore a being natural. The movies permit an exteriorization of moving visual thought process (that is, when they are NOT tied to drama, story, literary and/or visually symbolic/snap-shot mechanisms of re-cognition)...(this being my corollary to your asking a reader "to look at, then through, the words", I think).

I don't know how to convey the full feeling I had on receiving, in the hospital, mind!, "ARK 95...For Stan Brakhage", nor the wondrous reverberations of that gift since. I have a slowly dissolving clot in my right leg, which'll continue to slowly dissolve for 3 months or more, during which time it could throw a piece of itself into my lungs or heart or brain (the latter two less likely) and kill me at any "instanter" TIME. To offset this, my blood has been artificially "thinned" (with a drug called Cumeden) which makes me light-headed, often fatigued in a most un-natural way, and renders me at high risk should I bump my head or have ANY kind of serious accident (I could bleed to death very fast): in other words, I'm living in a "state of Truth" both as continuum and every fragile step I take...a very uncomfortable state of being for Humans—requiring something like the ultimate "negative capability". I carry myself like an uncooked egg, a step at a time, bolstered often ONLY by

Heaven's edge
full sight unsealed
dazzle snowball in Hell

no bounds but belief
Gods, who walk the world
crosses intercross in a cloud

and of course: "delight! delight! delight!" as well as "body sundered by stars"...and (as I continue, in this state, to play with Marilyn and Anton AND to continue my work on "Vision In Meditation #4"...) "rare realms saved endlessly"—the prayer.

It is the particular magic of Poets (and something beyond, or at least additional to, Art) that they have the most extraordinary sense of timing—that they come, with the ONLY words, at exactly the crucial moment...as you have herewith done!

Thank you. / Blessings, / Stan

STAN BRAKHAGE AND RONALD JOHNSON (WITH JIM SHEDDEN)

"Another way of looking at the universe" (1997)

STAN BRAKHAGE: There are some who would caution us about our use of language, who would say that there's no point in saying things like "primordial," that it's ridiculous to talk about a camera that's invented in the late nineteenth century and a projection mode and so on, and then to talk about how its touching the primordial mind—they'd tell us it's absurd.

RONALD JOHNSON: Well, we've still got at the base of the spine that reptilian brain, so everybody's brain still goes back to the beginning of time. I don't see why we can't use "primordial."

SB: And I could make the case that film—just by the very fact that it was invented within the last century, or just a century ago—is beginning at a beginning, is fit to begin where anything began. And its closest kinship is cave painting. It's at a cave painting stage at best in its development.

RJ: That's one of the reasons that Guy Davenport is so fascinated by the cave paintings. Suddenly we realized that art itself was a human thing, that went all the way back. It's always been there. Man has always been gifted to articulate his perception of the universe in a very graceful and perceptive way from the very beginning.

SB: Why do you suppose?

RJ: I don't believe necessarily in God; I believe in a transcendence or something. I believe that brains were made to communicate with the universe. Life was always tending towards the human brain, so that the universe could start talking to itself. And the cave paintings make that very clear, because they're very technically agile and can handle certain things very well. Of course they were looking at animals, and lived in an animistic universe. And art became a conversation with their world.

SB: I don't want to overstate this case, because I'm living and enjoying much and appreciating nature, and my films show how much I deeply care. I'm paying homage to and re-presenting nature as one aspect of my work, and creating anew in thanks for what's been given to me. But also there is that thing I have—my sense of those cave beginnings, or any kid making a collection and storing it somewhere in the attic, hiding it, showing it maybe to his or her closest friend: all that is the anomaly of being human and being at odds with the given phenomenological world. So that's my feeling of it.

§

JIM SHEDDEN: Stan, you were talking last night about incomplete literary epics, and suggesting that incompletion was part of the form. How about film cycles or film epics—have you finished any of yours?

SB: Yeah. *Dog Star Man*, and it's fulsome spread as *The Art of Vision. Scenes from Under Childhood* is unfinished. It cost so much, and the grant was taken away, so I had to back up and kind of put an ending on it, and abandon it, so it's unfinished.

JS: You once divided your work into "The Book of Film," "The Book of Family," and so on.

SB: People always made the mistake of labeling me as the mountain-hero-family man. And even across that period when Jane and I were together, when I made so many of those films, only a third of my work had anything to do with family. The rest of it—two thirds of it—was about many other subjects, about things that I was encountering on the road, or even up there. So at some point I had a sense of what could be called a book—in the sense that you can call a cathedral a book—what could be called "A Book of Family."

"The Book of Film" is where film presents that that only film could present, that's not leaning on picture or reproduction or anything, that by grace of thanks for all that's been given to me, for all the pictures that I've had across my life, that there come from me things that could only come from me that's given back in thanks like a little bouquet in the night, of the unnameable, the ineffable. And so in that sense, all of what other people would call my abstract films, which as you know I don't regard as abstract at all, are the most concrete pieces of my making, because they come most directly from my synapses and my thinking. The sense of style, just like people can tell the difference between my signature and anybody else's, is unique to me. And not for anything that I need to be proud of just that when I etch, as I'm now doing on film, my signature is integral with that making, not out of some school training or look ma no hands, or how smart I am, but because that's the me that was given to me to be.

RJ: That's one of the reasons that I put the palm print in *ARK*—

SB: Yes, that's so beautiful.

RJ: —so that they could read my palm anytime that that's still reproduced. It's also the entry of Orphée, Cocteau's *Orphée*, into the underworld. He puts his hand out into the mercury to go into the underworld. That palmprint is me and nobody else.

SB: And also that's one of the earliest things that we have from our ancestors. I mean imagine taking a straw and blowing dye through it on the cave wall leaving your hand print just like that, like you have in the book, fingers splayed, just like that, on the wall, sprayed around by blown paint, with the dawn of the human.

Last night, after everything was over, Nick Dorsky was the only one that saw that when the going really gets rough in *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea*, that is, when we're sunk in all this adulthoodedness, and the child's imagination is trying to make it leap into some semblance of flower, something fit to weave with the sea, Nick saw that my hand starts becoming integral in the lens. You can see parts and bits and pieces and shadows of my hand blocking things out, stopping them, so my hand comes in to shape, to struggle with and grapple literally with the environs. And Nick saw it come to this point where, and I agree, where Eden *does* get restored. But it's not as it was before, it's now more remembered. It's there amidst a series of emblematic pictures, like the child and the man and the boat and the crow. It's not as it was. It's remembered, and it's among a series of things.

RJ: *Paradise Regained.* Nothing is never the same.

SB: Yeah, in essence. But isn't that what you're working with in *RADI OS*? You may have, and I'm so grateful you do, and I'm envious in a way, a happier sense of the universe than I—but Milton did not.

RJ: No. But he was telling a Biblical myth, I wasn't. Blake rewriting *Paradise Lost* had another thing too; he didn't believe old Nobodaddy was God. Blake is definitely an influence with me: you see things and create things, and that is paradise.

SB: What about "No ideas but in things"?

RJ: Oh, I believe that.

SB: I can't, you see. I work with ephemera. I can take pictures of them but they remain forever representations. I did try very hard, and took the kinds of pictures that would be supportive or inspired by the concepts of Williams' "No ideas but in things," but in fact it's not that applicable to film, whose nature is to be fleeting and moving on. It's a weave of light that's forever dissolving

RJ: I've written a piece called "Hurrah for Euphony" for a young poet, where I say, "Poetry is quick with specifics." "Quick" points to "the quick and the dead." When you get the specific things, that's where poetry is alive.

SB: That's where film starts becoming picture, or illustration, so that's a danger for film as I see it. But what film can do is lift these specifics so they can be made to reverberate. You can create inferences, since the eye is always roving. The eye is very open to a reverberating spread of what we would call metaphor, I guess, in language, open to a multiplicity of visual means, but not an endless multiplicity. There's a skein or a net of great exactitude. So you can't say one can come and see anything into it because that's just a mess. But within that exactitude this spread is available to a wide variety of individual approaches, each given time. Or a person can across a lifetime, as I hope, see the same film over and over again, and see now this aspect of it and now that, and finally have the whole complexity of it.

RJ: There are a lot of people out there—we're differentiated as artists—but there are people who don't ever really see things as they are. These people are "seeing camel in the clouds," as Guy Davenport puts it. I mean that's not the way the artist works. A cloud is a cloud is a cloud.

SB: Yes, but it can infer a camel, and still be a cloud, and if you can do that, then you've got the same as what I'm talking about with Mackay's* painting here—that it can be a flat, and absolutely have a fulsome sense of depth. But if it is also a flat, it doesn't run what is for me a risk, and I'm kind of surprised that you would want to drift into a painting, if you can have the assumption that you can drift into it. So I want there to be space in there, and light, but I want it to be quite clear that it's something for me to look into, not walk into.

RJ: That's because we're twentieth-century people.

SB: But we're *right* in being twentieth-century people!

RJ: Well...

SB: Think in terms of the land-grabbing and "real" estate that came out of the Renaissance, and its trick of space.

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* Kathryn Mackay, a Toronto artist affiliated with the Toronto film movement, but herself a painter. [Brakhage's note.]

RJ: But that's further on down the line. Henry James couldn't look at twentieth-century art. He could see Turner perhaps—

SB: Pound couldn't even look at twentieth-century art!

RJ: —his painter was John Singer Sargent. But that's the way the world was viewed at the beginning of the century, before we got to Modernism. And that's what made Modernism. They said, "No, there's another way of looking at the universe..."

SB: "Another way of looking at the universe." Well, I guess I'm a progressivist. You're probably right. But I'm moved to think that there is a move to a sanity of recognition of the universe that comes with that openendedness that begins with Romanticism without that being dependent upon stitching things along the line of fact and logic. I see this openendedness as our only hope.

Except for poets, I think language is a damnation of human sensibility and in the blind mouths of politicians is destroying us all. And I think also that narrative drama, as a form that's unchanged since the Greek, is a trap that's loaded people with the dice that makes it very possible that the Third World War will be in Jerusalem and all the apocalyptic visions of drama will be fulfilled. People will move to try to fulfill those prophecies if we don't move to get out of the three-act play. We should either get it down to a two-act play or a six-act play, or do any damn thing to break up this narrowed concept which has become really narrowed through the sieve of motion pictures of what it means to be dramatic with each other, and what drama is.

JS: [inaudible question about the bible]

SB: Well, the Bible is many different kinds of books—the one I have is the King James translation—and it's set in the forms of plays, poems, essays, stories, etc., so that one can have the recognition of the various forms that are in the Bible, and as such it's a collection that is filled with much goodness and much that's to me questionable, if not uninteresting. I can take it as all of it seems so far as I can tell aesthetically interesting. It's beautiful language—these King James translators are great translators.

RJ: And we grew up with it. You can't get away from it, even if you don't believe in it. We're steeped in the language and the images.

Well, you know I took the Psalms and made a long poem out of them, which again turns into Orpheus and Euridice. I learned from Zukofsky that you can make up a rule. So what I did with the Psalms was I took one letter out of it, so you had "Palms." And then my rule was that I had to have at least one word from every Psalm and that they had to be in sequence, which gave me a lot of leeway. And so I turned them into the songs of Orpheus.

SB: I don't know this!

RJ: It's right in there.

SB: It's in *ARK*?

RJ: It's in the Foundations.

SB: As you're speaking of it is not the way I read it. I must have skipped a cog there as I was reading it.

RJ: Well, *RADI OS* gives you the process of what I was working with, but Palms—if you take the "s" out of Psalms—then that tells you the process I was working with. I don't anywhere in the book say that it's made out of the Psalms. That's left there to infer. Because I found in doing that, although I was telling another thing than the Psalms tell, you can tell by the profundity of the language, I was able to get another thing by using someone else's words. It's like Lucas Foss's Handel, where he cuts it in pieces, which is what influenced me to do *RADI OS*. He said, "The spaces are mine."

SB: I can't help but like what John Cage said when taken to Handel's *Messiah* and seemed kind of irritated and bored as they were leaving and the people that took him said, "Don't you like to be deeply moved?" And he said, "Yes I do, but I don't like to be pushed." Which could apply to Milton too.

STAN BRAKHAGE

Chicago Review Article

There are many living poets who inspire my life, whose work I enjoy as a regularity in my living, but there are three, right now, who contribute directly to my filmmaking as powerfully as Pound, Stein, Olson, Creeley, Dorn when I was young* (as powerfully as "the ancients" of the craft whose poems form a basis for my, and everyone else's, English-language being): these three today are Michael McClure, Ronald Johnson, and Lisa Jarnot.

McClure's aesthetic evolution has, since the friendship in our early twenties, always seemed consonant with mine—i.e., his words worn as if "on the sleeve" of his physical being (much as I see my filmed images as extensions of my optic system, and then later my whole body as mentor to that system. Finally now the medium itself, the muse, as it were, becomes outlet for my nerve system's most hidden sparking innards). McClure always, and more and more as he grows older, gives his reader access to the verbal impulses of his *whole* body's thought (as distinct from simply and only brain-think, as it is with most who write). He invents a form for these cellular messages of his, a form which will feel as if it were organic on the page; and he sticks with it across his life "like a solid moving through an inferno." I too stick with the given window of film, the slightly variable rectangle of film's-frame; and I (however much I admire D. W. Griffith's varieties of frames) adhere to that widening beam of projector light and its rectangle of eye's composed feed-back—*this* "the stage" for sharing the anomalies of my visual privacy...(only exception, the *Purgation* sequence of *The Dante Quartet*, in cinemascope for its "widening gyre" of transformation, as Yeats would have it): and my display of visions (like Michael's enverbaled vision) come to the film window ("the page"?) directly from my physical self, the rhythms and tones of my biological response, my very breath and organic breadth of being.

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* Poet Robert Kelly could be included here too, except I've always regarded him as a philosophical poet so distinct from moving visual thinking that my relationship with him has been happily one of opposites attract rather than the kind of inspiration or influence of the previous poets named.

Few poets have managed to *complete* an epic poem in our Time: Pound's *Cantos* are left undone, trailing off in a ragged stitch of lines more emblematic of the social Times of their post-WW II writing then integrally related to the whole poem; Olson also leaves a lovely "garland," as it were, of variants upon the themes of *Maximus*; Dr. W. C. Williams also veering off *Patterson* into the variant greatness of *Desert Music*; H. D. coming-to-rest but *not* to a thematic conclusion of *Helen In Egypt.*

The only completed epic poetics of the twentieth century I personally accept-as-such are those of Louis Zukofsky, his *"A"*, Gertrude Stein, her *Stanzas in Meditation*, possibly completed, although one wonders (in the light of Ulla Dydo's monumental research) if the terrible quarrel between Alice Toklas and Gertrude didn't shift the poem radically away from its pristine linguistic beginnings into the more narrative drama of their irresolvable argument. Finally, for me then, we have Ronald Johnson's *ARK*, miraculously finished a couple years before his death. This work, more than any epic (since Pound's *Cantos* inspired my film *Dog Star Man*), has directly engendered a reciprocal epic film, the *Vancouver Island Trilogy*: I stood at times waist deep in ocean reading the typewritten (unpublished at that time) continuance (past *ARK* 50) of the poem which Ronald was kind enough to send me. The full poem had been printed (with a verbal description of myself enoceaned) by the time 8 years later when I was photographing the third section of my film. Ronald and I are both from Kansas, as is Michael McClure (all three of us growing up within a hundred square miles of each other): from those "grounds" Ronald manages linguistic landscapes which finally encompass the Western world, its history coming down finally (as in a child's vision) to the exactitudes of that geography and biology before, and being one with, the eyes and ears of the poet's language—an imaginary multiple series of recognitions of "real toads" (as Marianne Moore would have it) inhabiting the grain-growing (under inverted blue bowl of sky) *flats* of Kansas. My related imperative was to imagine a "real" (i.e. completely "royal") Victoria childhood (which I could, thus, share-thru-art) with my wife, Marilyn, who grew up on those Victorian grounds I'd never previously known: thus Johnson and I, each with love, went eye/ear-&-hand together on our separate loving adventures, beginning with my *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea*, thru *The Mammals of Victoria* to *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him*. But it should be added that all this time of these makings the poetry of Michael McClure (that 3rd Kansan) accompanied my filmwork as he has most of my adult life.

Lisa Jarnot comes into my life as an interviewer seeking info. apropos my relationship with poet Robert Duncan; but more personally she comes carrying greetings from Jess Collins. I'm immediately aware of her as someone who has become friends with the always elusive and hermetic Jess, lifetime companion of Robert: and I have high hopes for her proposed book on Robert...am delighted inasmuch as there's not yet been *one* really meaningful biography about Duncan. By the end of our interview I feel a friendship between Lisa and I, some sense of a possible *lifetime* relationship; and I am immediately deeply aware of all the poet companions who came to me through Robert Duncan: but before all else Duncan gave me Gertrude Stein, and perhaps last (after his death) Lisa Jarnot—appropriately enough, inasmuch as her poetry rings (especially *Ring of Fire*) with the adamant pragmatic logic of Stein's *Tender Buttons*, as well as the "cast of thousands" narrative (each word personae) of *Stanzas In Meditation*...and yet is essentially unlike either or the writings of any other. She's taken a cue from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*:

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

This, her frontquote to the book *The Fall of Orpheus*, separates her aesthetic clearly, for me, from Rilke's sense of the poet's chore being one of rendering material objects and beings "invisible" by naming them. The vision of a world disappearing into poems is one which has established formidable, and admirable traditions in our Time; but I, as filmmaker, can only admire from a distance. It is rather the hard-edge-word-references to daily living, coming from the most personal life of (for prime example) Louis Zukofsky, which create for me literary paradigms (constructed of signs, rather than symbols) consonant with those of moving pictures.

...the hot spell of speaking speech,
the language laced
with tigers laced with night
(Jarnot's "Right Speech" from *Ring of Fire*)

I find there's always the act of source implicit in her language. However adrift in linguistic aesthetics, in sheer music-of-rhythmed-sounds, her words are never severed from the means that engendered them; and the consequent meanings are never detached from the meditative drama of each whole poem.

As a filmmaker, these days mostly of hand-painted so-called "abstractions," I often characterize my current working methods thus: "I want to leave something like a snail's trail in the moonlight." Intentionally romantic as this image is, it ultimately suggests the practical struggle of the snail, the tough grapple with earth and leaf, so forth, in its passage which deposits a delicate tracery of its "sweat," which is also an earnest writ and, of course, a film. If blessed by the moon it could be, and by God's grace occasionally is, an inspiration. If fully perceived it should be nothing less then the truth, the whole truth, and nothing (yes, out of nothing) but the truth.

September, 2001

STAN BRAKHAGE (as told to Jennifer Dorn)

Brakhage Meets Tarkovsky

After the panel [at the 1983 Telluride Film Festival], they had arranged for Tarkovsky to see some of my films. I had warned Bill Pence that he might not like my films and I was nervous about showing them. All they could arrange, under the circumstances, was a little room in the old Sheridan Hotel. It was about 6' by 10' and it had in it a brass bed, a bureau on which the projector sat, and eight people: the projectionist; next to him on the bureau, the Polish animator Zbigniew Rybczynski, who won an Oscar this year for his short *Tango*; a Russian student of film and Tarkovsky's assistant, Olga, a plump, sweet, charming girl; then I sat in the corner, as far back as I could get; and next to me Tarkovsky; then his wife; and then, since the only room left was the bed, Jane and [Krzysztof] Zanussi lay down on the bed.

Everyone stares at the sepia-toned wallpaper of faded floral design against which is shown my film, about TV size. The film dominates the wallpaper which is very old and faded. This is a very cramped room, the windows have been covered with blacking, there's no air and it's very hot and when the projector goes on it adds its heat. But all this was nothing compared to the films when they hit the wallpaper.

The first film was *Window Water Baby Moving*. First of all I got nervous because Olga, who is teetering over me on the bureau, begins to sway. I've seen people faint at that film and I don't know, maybe she's never seen childbirth before. And then I see Tarkovsky's wife averting her face from the screen at times as you get to see some of the more explicit details of childbirth.

So first of all I'm afraid that somebody's going to faint. And then I'm afraid that I'm going to have insulted his wife. I almost got killed once in South Dakota for that. I showed the film to a bunch of people and they shot at me because they felt I had insulted their wives. So I'm getting very nervous but I didn't expect what actually happened.

Tarkovsky starts talking in rapid Russian, with Zanussi answering him, and whatever he's saying it's obviously angry. Finally, after a lot of these exchanges, Jane had the presence of mind to say, "What's going on? What's he saying?" So Zanussi starts translating and he says, "Well..." and we all wait, "Well...he says," and we wait some more, "He says that Art must have a mystery to it and this is too scientific to be Art."

This doesn't bother me too much. I told Zanussi to tell him to just wait—we had another film coming shortly. Because I know what's coming next is *Dog Star Man, Part IV.* And this is not going to look scientific.

So the leader comes through, the room's heated up, on comes *Dog Star Man, Part IV.* He starts exploding in Russian the minute the hand-painted frames are flickering on the screen, along with the layers of superimposition. He's obviously raging! No one's heard him talk so much since he's been here. He's hammering away in incredibly rapid Russian.

He ran, in the course of an hour and a half, through every argument against my work and any other individual's work that I have ever heard, from the Emperor's New Clothes argument through this-is-too-rapid-it-hurts-the-eyes, through "this is sheer self-indulgence," to "film is only a collaborative art." And in detail, "the color is shit" and "what is this paint? Why do you do this?"

Next comes *Untitled No. 6* of the *Short Films* of 1975 and I thought this might move him because it's based on a Mandelstam poem. The poem was my source of inspiration. In the film you see light moving slowly over different household objects and the rabbit's eye and the chicken with the bloodied wing and all these are in a stretch of purely metaphorical combinations. But that threw him into an even greater rage. Now he's yelling! He's standing up in his chair, he's sitting down, he's looking at the film out of the periphery of his eye as he's yelling things at Zanussi, and he won't look at me at all. My shoulder's up against him but he doesn't look at me and he's about the level of my navel.

In the mean time, Jane and his wife are laughing and they're holding hands, and smiling, like "isn't this a wonderful cock fight!" Because I must say I gave for everything I got. I ran through my whole repertoire of any kind of answer I'd ever given in the briefest and simplest way I've ever done. I've had twenty-five years of practice in being beat up in public. At one point he lashed out in a diatribe against innovation itself, which I haven't heard before and may be the only place you could hear it from would be Russia. The Avant Garde crowds I've played to never thought of that one.

I said, "What do you think Cezanne would say to that?" To which the answer came back, "I'm sure Mr. Brakhage knows perfectly well what Cezanne would say to that. However what I say is, innovation is reckless and destructive."

The next one was *Made Manifest.* That's just waves coming in, with sparkles and so on and by this point there was so much talk and heat and radiation, I felt we could blow the whole town away and show that—not only countries, but people can do this too. The nineteenth-century surroundings are absolutely imprinted on my mind. No telephone even. Even in the wildest of Tarkovsky's places, even in the "Zone" in his movies, there's a telephone that rings. There's no way out in this room.

It was excruciating. Every now and then the Polish animator is throwing in a comment or two that Zanussi isn't even bothering to translate because it's so rapid it never stops.

I can laugh now but my heart was absolutely breaking for the films. At that point I was feeling that I had rather it had not occurred at all, than these films running against this absurd wallpaper, with all these angry aesthetics...

But still, I'm not giving up. The next film was going to be *Arabic 3*. I remember saying, wait a minute, just like I had after *Window Water Baby Moving,* I have some pure music coming. Because he's arguing, this isn't music, it has symbols, things that are nameable. It was a very intelligent argument, maybe one of the most intelligent I've ever had, but it's totally dedicated to destroying the possibility of my kind of films.

Then comes on *Arabic 3* and this maybe tripped him off the most. "What is this? It doesn't mean anything, it's just capricious." And I'm coming back and saying, "Shut up and look and you'll see there's a melodic line and shapes don't just occur anywhere in the frame, there's a balance." "But what does it mean?" "What do you mean what does it mean? You have a lot of statements about music in your films..." "But this isn't the same as music," and it goes on and on.

At this point I'm determined that one film will have a chance.

The only film I have left to show is *Murder Psalm.* So I got up and gave an impassioned appeal that we be able to just look at a film now, there had been enough talk. I explained the reasons I'd made the film and that I was being as true to moving visual thinking as I could and this is how I think and here it is. And actually they paid me the great homage to remain silent during *Murder Psalm.*

And then they broke into rages and screams and carrying on. By they I mean Tarkovsky although Zanussi is agreeing with him and adding some of his own comments. The only affability I had in the circumstance was when Olga turned to me and said, "You know I've never had the chance to see anything like this ever before in my life. There have been three books written on you in Russian but nobody has ever seen any of your films. When I get back to Russia and tell them that I have seen your films, they won't let me talk about anything else for months, maybe years!"

Then, a further irony, we all had to sit there and watch a film by a Russian emigre that Tarkovsky had promised to watch. We had to endure a stupid, senseless movie in which the Russian girl who's fat can't get a boyfriend or adjust to America. It felt about ten hours long although it was only half an hour. I did hear afterwards that Tarkovsky told the Russian emigre that it was the stupidest film he ever saw.

They didn't say any more to me and after the film ended they all walked out. But the next day I sat down and the Polish animator offered me some vodka—wonderful, sweet-tasting vodka with spirit grass in the bottle—and turning to his friend and interpreter, I get the message that he would like to express what he feels about the films that we saw yesterday.

I wasn't too sure I wanted to know but I said OK. He started out by saying he's never seen anything like them, like Olga, and that it's a total change in the history of art. However, he says, art is irrelevant. The greatest artists of the nineteenth century are not Cezanne and the Impressionists but are Daguerre and Napier. For the whole history of the world humans have only been trying to project themselves to live for all eternity. The wheel was invented in the same impulse and spirit that created the Lascaux paintings, and now the real artist is the technician and everyone's going to be able to live forever.

It took an hour for him to go through the history of the world and he wouldn't let me speak. I finally said, "Either I speak or I leave." So the translator refused to translate from him anymore and I was allowed to speak. He said artists destroy ecology, that the stone that's carved by Michaelangelo is destroyed from the stone's viewpoint. So I said, Jean Cocteau, *Orpheus*, I saw the movie, and that caused him to turn red.

His pitch was that the new technology is not going to be destructive and we're all going to live forever. So I said, "Do you recognize the destruction of ecology in making film? That it's compounded of the slavery of people digging silver and picking berries for the dyes, the ugly working conditions of people working with chemicals that kill them, even the Argentine clippings of bulls. How can you make films if you feel that way? Why don't you wait for the new technology?"

He never did answer the question although it bothered him very much. But I know the answer. Filmmaking isn't his work, it's his job. He's damned good at it and he's a good talker. At one point I said I hoped he'd see my films sometime, because I don't make my films silently out of caprice. I feel they need a silent attention and they had a non-stop sound-track of the most distracting order yesterday against a floral pattern and I hoped he didn't take that to be a representation of my work.

He looked puzzled as it was being translated to him and he said, "Don't you know that Tarkovsky went on talking about this for the rest of the day? For two hours they were raging and carrying on. And he's still talking about it!" He said he'd known Tarkovsky for years on and off in Poland, and many people think he's taken a vow of silence like in *Andrei Rublev*. For weeks he'll never say a word. He said he'd never heard him talk so much all at once and he said, "I'm very jealous!" He said he'd never seen him so excited about anything and that my films would cast a shadow through his work.

I was very grateful to get that perspective from the Polish film maker, a perspective I might never have known.

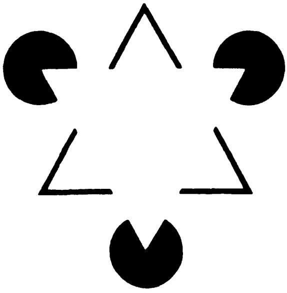
Excerpted from "Brakhage pans Telluride Gold,"
Rolling Stock 6, 1983.

STAN BRAKHAGE

from "Time...en dit"

GEOMETRIC versus MEAT-INEFFABLE (1994)

There are two pictorial extremes of human thought process—The Geometric and (what I like to call) Meat-ineffable...no "the" before "Meat"—inasmuch as raw cells are such a diversity of impulse as to defy hierarchy.



The "Triangles" above do not exist on paper: they are the creation of the Geometric mind, prompted by cues; they are inferred.

To be sure, it is such diversity-of-cells' electrical arcing which hatches The Geometric also, but it does so in spite of the originating cell structure irregularities—as an act-of-spark, I'd guess, or rather in organized emulation of the energies of their synapse process...as an Ideal, so to speak, of the "straight" energetic snap-line between two cells, the triangle between three, square four, soforth on up the scale of "hedrons" until a "circle" can be inferred.

It is all (i.e. Geometrical Thought) inferred, inasmuch as meat energies move in waves, as pulse: but the inference is *intrinsic* to Humans, existing only in Nature where Humans are—as anyone knows who has flown over wilderness and then, from an airplane window, spotted the beginning of Farm or Town.

The so-called geometrics of the bee-hive, or of the flies' eyes, are (upon closer inspection) mere approximates of such as the Human Mind imagines—and then "reads into" the microcosms of Nature—as are the idealized circles of suns, the rectangles of rock formation, or those fractured symmetries of the Crystalline so prized by humans, all *approximations* of The Geometrical Mind (including Towns and Farms) which when presented to human sensibility *are* prized simply because the imaging of them (through the viscous meaty orbs of human receptivity) is more easily absorbed as corollary of a mental ideal than, say, the ordinarily overwhelming multiplicity of most of Nature's irregularly globular and disjunctly fretted entanglement-of-curves impinging (via radiant waves) upon the senses.

The Human Mind has fashioned its Ideal in despite and despising of its self's pulp of animal being—an ordering at the expense of cell's self...a bureaucracy of...a veritable facism of...sense's sense of self.

Language is but an offspring of this mode-of-thought, for all words are but signs evolved from, and implicit in, the geometries of thinking.

Contrarily, and as an antidote to the rigidities of The Geometric, Meat-ineffable is that steady inclination of the brain to mimeticize its intrinsically variable shapes as visible manifestations resistant to either name or category but true (in its variability, to begin with) to the very *organic mode* (as distinct from process) of its own existence.

Whether there are, or are not, straight lines in Nature is beside the point: we are too viscous to receive them as such...thus they must, if that IS The Ideal, be invented by thought.

Words are, at scratch, but a glyphic extension of Geometric thought inasmuch as words can be seen as signs which (certainly as hieroglyphs) abstract the phenomenological input of the visible world. These signifiers later evolve to make oblique reference to ear's intake, as the tongue is given further (and more abstracted) cues for mouth reference to invisibilities (as when hieroglyphic cultures compound noun-like picture-glyphs to express the tensions of actions and transitions): it only remained for the cultures with curving and coiling glyphs, such as the Arabic, to extend nomenclature into the utterly abstract.

If the term "Picture" is defined as "a collection of nameable shapes within a frame," then it can be seen that the whorled and coiled insides of hearing have allowed the indefinable shifts of cell-life to mimic themselves, again—to allow Meat Conscious to begin again to express its self-shapes in picture making.

But once "Picture" is defined as "a collection of nameable shapes *in composition* within a frame," then the ordering of those shapes inexorably comes under laws, as it were, of compositional logic; so that the ordering increasingly *implies* connective lines, triangles, squares, so forth, of compositional logic, thus The Geometric herds pictorial forms with near-absolute authority over every Meat shape within the Geometric grid and (as these are "nameable shapes") herds each Geometrically disposed reference of shape to external World.

If "Picture" be defined without the word "nameable," (as in "Abstract Art") then Meat-ineffable thinking becomes pictorially possible—despite the frame...the frame, then, in such Pics., defining the world *outside* the picture.

Many great painters in the last 150 years have sought to resolve these conflicting modes of pictorial thought process. Hans Hofmann comes most easily to mind, with his subversion of the web of Renaissance Perspective thru a, as he called it, "push pull" theory of color—i.e. that a more honest representation of depth on canvas can be accomplished thru juxtaposition of colors (rather than that Renaissance trick of arranging shapes according to an implied grid of lines converging on a "vanishing point" within the painting): but Hofmann is especially a revolutionary in those paintings which mix frank rectangles with organic globs in schema resistant to any geometric ordering. Mark Rothko's rectangles are frank enough also, but within them the subtle variations of tone hint at geo-classical ordering. Clifford Still's paintings ("landscapes" turned sideways) also (if turned on their sides) suggest hidden perspectival logic; but these latter two painters, at least, being "abstract," or ineffably inclined, create surfaces which neither invoke nor conform altogether to frame: and they thus resist geometrical authority. They, Jackson Pollock, and others hypnogogically inspired (from early Kandinsky to Olitsky) can be seen to be attempting to depict cell-shape's most immediate radiance. A chronological viewing of Kandinsky's or Mondrian's oeuvre reveals, in this context, a gradual "giving over" to the influence of The Geometrical. Franz Klein can be seen as fixated upon the emergence of ineffable—(thus Meat-radiant)—glyph. But only Hofmann regularly takes on, in much of his later work, the struggle to balance the pictorial extremes of ideal forms and raw organic shapes in the area of the rectangular canvas.

Film, in the hands of the very few who've seen it as an Art, has, from its beginning, just naturally inherited the struggle between yin (if that term can be thought to denote Meat-radiance as source of shape) and the yang of compositional idealism. It is perhaps fortunate that Film, as any possible Art, was birthed thru The Theatre of Georges Méliès, because only the theatrical tradition (with its "flats" of scenic illusion in the cramped actual-space of the stage) carried on the visual traditions of Sienese (as distinct from Florentine and Roman) painters—i.e. those painters of Sienna (from Martini to Lippi) who most resisted Renaissance perspective. Méliès, a stage magician, inherited this tradition and immediately translated it over into his films.

But Film is, anyway, intrinsically resistant to either a grid or an otherwise geometric representation of depth. Despite its camera and projector lenses (glass ground to achieve approximations-of-depth in conformity with dominant Western Painting), despite its framing devices, and despite whatever "sets" composed for it...Film IS essentially a shadow play. The instant a photographed person stops moving, he or she immediately turns into a flat shape on the screen, no matter how much chiaroscuro lighting is applied to mold semblance of depth. Because the effect of motion in Film is dependent upon the flicker of interruptive black between consecutive stills, the primary sense-of-depth in a film is (as with a strobe) convex vis-a-vis the pulsations of repeatedly lit screen, as if each frame were emerging from the screen itself (which, in the fact of bounce-light, it is)...a progression of images beseemingly emergent upon The Viewer. (With T.V. or backprojectioning, viewers are conversely drawn as if into a cave: thus the intrinsic hypnotics of those media).

From the beginning, then, the painterly tactics of spacial (as well as compositional) idealization haven't sufficed to organize either "the plane" or the representation-of-depth in motion pictures: but the biological process of the transmission of organic radiance finds, in Film, an almost corollary—except inasmuch as commercial film-makers eschew what's natural in favor of traditional ideals...(for example, photography's "line grain" drive to eliminate any visibility of the chemical constituent of film stock, the silver halides, etc., which compose image at scratch, the "graininess" of Film: these, a shift each frame, constitute a visual paradigm of cells themselves variably radiating light's lightning-like transmission of image.)

There is an almost endless variety of perspectives represented in human drawing and painting. It is as difficult to realize that each of them is sure corollary of what, eventually, their culture's people saw as Reality, as it is to recognize Renaissance perspective as but *another,* among many, realities: (A recent viewing of Sir Lawrence Olivier's *Henry V* much persuaded my university students, though I prefaced the film with slide projections of such works of The Middle Ages as, for example, the many "Books of Hours," upon which Olivier had based his set constructions: by the time this visually thoughtful movie was completed, Olivier's Middle Ages vision—a "cartoon" of our ordinary senses of perspective—had been accepted as normal, i.e. "*real,*" despite my preparation of the class, my revelation of his source, despite our pre-disposition to the painterly orderings of the last several hundred years).

Geometrics, and attendant perspective assumptions (and word effabilities) are inventions of human thought (as are colors, as we call 'em—not existent in light as other than variable wave-lengths which variably tickle the brain into shared social responses of "red," "green," "blue," soforth): the only reasonably "real" external manifestations of inner nervous receptivity-of-impulse might, ironically, be found in the arts we call "abstract"; for these, at least, suggest the un-idealized meat means (source of all our Consciousness) in direct express.

(I wish to dedicate this essay to poet Michael McClure, who was first to make me aware verbally of "meat consciousness" and is still the primary "singer" of that consideration.)

HAVING DECLARED A BELIEF IN GOD... (1995)

Having declared a belief in God, and God's presence in current human affairs and (however obliquely) human consciousness, I think it is incumbent (in times like these, times of varying styles-of-doubt) to attempt to write what I personally mean by the word "God." I'm no theologian, obviously, nor even an acceptable "cracker-barrel"

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I have found, across years of photography and editing, that the verbal can open into the visual, like a swing gate in the mind, or sprung door, revealing plethoras of inexplicable and often utterly unexpected visitations. It is my only excuse for titling my films—that words can announce Light's-life, as it were, and prompt a chaotic display of illumination into Vision...and at the same time can tutor chaos into rhythmic mimic of cathectic thought.

The twin aspects of seeing—(1) sheer reception of the entire fiery illumination of the world, its bounce-light, and (2) cathexis-of-such into visual thinking—*can* be guided (in imitation of language, perhaps) to co-exist at once and one, like the yes/no or then/now of unconscious process. It is as if that which sparks the meat-tongue and heaves the diaphragm into such shaping of air as we call "speech" can also cathect, haunt, *invest* light waves, sparkled optics, and the electricity of thought into memorable coherency with*out* any loss of one's sense of chaos (i.e., chaos: "a state of things in which chance is supreme," as Webster's has it).

"Oh God!" "Dear God," and the like, as pleas uttered in desperate nervous extremity, are the signifiers of illumination and envisionment at one, except inasmuch as the words stand shackled to wish. The aesthetic of such prayer might best be expressed "Oh/God," "OGod," so forth.

How can God be defined in our language except as some ultimate compound Good. Perhaps it should be compacted to "Gd," that it be grunt of the flute-throat trapped in the mouth of the sayer rather than social expression...(for as a *saying*, this word may be uttered easily immediately after, say, the act of slaying a helpless creature to no purpose; but as a term thrust to the arched roof of the mouth and curled upon the tongue, one would suppose it must adhere, in the mind, to benevolent kinship and Grace in the eventuality of thought).

But as God can be experienced as ecstasis passionately, then one must factor all pain plentifully into any equation. The fevers of being Human, The Wrath of God as experience of life-on-Earth, invigorate any notion of deity with such trembling of the vocal cords and quake of mind as can be heard in barest whisper and felt as slightest thought. Yet this, too, must come to be known as a goodness—even if against all body's sensibility of well-being.

How to picture such?...except, say, classically, as a stasis such as The Sphinx, or baroquely, as does Bach (with bass quaver at-one with theme engendering seemingly infinite variations) or romantically, as "A solid moving through an inferno" (as poet Michael McClure has it). None of these traditional formulas achieve a *moving* at-oneness. None permit both visible-chaos and envisioned-meaning coexistence (though each, at best, can be sensed as attempts at such resolve).

Fear, as an inward-looking condemnation of history's tradition-ridden forms, aborts outlook, creates props (defence) such as, for prime example, "subject matter." If the external be subject to one's self, and if self be, thus, possessed by oneself, then all explative becomes such muttering as an echo-chamber might be said to engender: the visual corollary to this word-trap would be mirror-reflecting-mirror's imagery to some supposed infinitesimal microcosm... I see myself seeing myself infinitely from a felt base-stance in diminishing, albeit solid-seeming, variations which, at sight's limit, opt, naturally enough, to be imagined and to be variably imaginable. The inverse of this imagined variability of one's diminished self, would most reasonably be a macrocosm in which one's self-shape didn't exist at all, coexistent with an imagined BEING, larger and ever larger, multiply amorphous shape-shifting of oneself: this, then is the classically baroque romance of self and God which Western aesthetics have engendered.

Let me draw a bit of an invented glyph. It is, to me at least, as if a drawer (pun unintended but certainly pertinent) in the "locked cabinet" of the page were opened. These (my crude copies of drawings by Miro) suggest an inhabitable space wherein God might be conceived?...inferred?—no!, "might be" (as *if* uttered) is better.

Why is that?

We are "in God's hands" we say, and sometimes feel an "I am" thus. It is earliest sense of cradling mother being invoked. It is a

Drawing by Jean Miro

For a very long time, while all the forms and then the stars were being named, God's dream was taken for granted; but once the multitude of earthly shapes, and shape-shifting animal life, had come close to being entirely named (the shapes of the sky growing dim in themselves) the remembrance of God's dream began to prompt all dreamt thought; and the memory of that was too terrible for shape-sentient men and women to bear: it, the dreamt Tree of God was become superfluous to the naming game—was in fact terrifyingly antithetical.

Just as the composer Anton Bruckner could only utter the word "Gott" in whispers, so too the reverent dreamer couldn't imagine a word for God in the hush of dream. Some then cursed by way of that term by day and forgot *all* dream by night.

At all/(any-which-way) turns—MIRACLES...or so it seems to the awake-sleeping/sleep-awake human dreamer in seizure of waves, light-waves, sound-waves the self-generated electrical waves of touch, the synaptic waves of scent-taste or taste impinging on brain—miracles, either as one is overwhelmed by sensation and/or senses chaos. The simplest logic posits order: the basest survival instinct is insistent appeal for order, for primal form: the whole nervous system's constantly jostled continuities and particularities of thought prompt thought's ultimatum—ordered form (to degree of agnostic, atheistic negation/positivistic BELIEF) in "crystal clear," like we say—giving that "cluster" of, then, centered idea the word "God": gender, generatrix, generator, evermore.

It is not, of course, as simple as that, nor nearly so complex either. You cannot say, "If there were no God one would have to be invented," because the absolute necessity for concept of "god" is, in itself, sufficient inference for the existence of a deity. It is the language which complexly signifies. The felt-need-for pervades each personal and all historical Human.

"With a great desire I have desired to come to you and rest with you in the marriage of Heaven, running to you by a new path as the clouds course in the purest air like sapphire": Abbess Hildegard von Bingen (d. 1170), poet, playwrite (supposed creator of "the morality play") and wondrous musical composer...myself wishing I could end this writ with one of her beautiful hymns—the intervals between her sung tones, the textures of her words, an audio equal to Miro's spacially charged doodling exhibited earlier in this (otherwise faulty) script.

IN CONSIDERATION OF AESTHETICS (1996)

Dedicated to Marilyn Brakhage

> Before a work of art people who feel little or no emotion for pure form find themselves at a loss. They are deaf men at a concert. They know that they are in the presence of something great, but they lack the power of apprehending it. They know that they ought to feel for it a tremendous emotion, but it happens that the particular kind of emotion it can raise is one that they can feel hardly or not at all. And so they read into the forms of the works those facts and ideas for which they are capable of feeling emotion, and feel for them the emotions that they can feel—the ordinary emotions of life. When confronted by a picture, instinctively they refer its forms back to the world from which they came. They treat created form as though it were imitated form, a picture as though it were a photograph. Instead of going out on the stream of art into a new world of aesthetic experience, they turn a sharp corner and come straight home to the world of human interests. For them the significance of the work of art depends on what they bring to it; no new thing is added to their lives, only the old material is stirred. A good work of visual art carries a person who is capable of appreciating it out of

> life into ecstasy: to use art as a means to the emotion of life is to use a telescope for reading the news. You will notice that people who cannot feel pure aesthetic emotions remember pictures by their subjects; whereas people who can, as often as not, have no idea what the subject of a picture is. They have never noticed the representative element, and so when they discuss pictures they talk about the shapes and forms and the relations and quantities of colors. Often they can tell by the quality of a single line whether or not a man is a good artist. They are concerned only with lines and colors, their relations and quantities and qualities; but only from these will they win an emotion more profound and far more sublime than that can be given by the description of facts and ideas.
>
> — Clive Bell, from his book *Art* (Capricorn Books, 1958)

The artist bending to the necessities of his/her creative process ought, for aesthetics' sake, eschew the strengths of the given medium.

Every craft is best qualified to achieve a particular affect. Music most ordinarily presents human inward noises—the heart-at-beat, the nerves strumming-in-ear, the breath and all attendant throat-flute, glottal mucus slippage...the seepage of blood's pitch in veins, or breath's tone-cross-tongue and reverberations 'gainst dome of mouth, the inner snare-drum/trombone of yawn jaw's cartilage, the castanets of teeth, nasal wind hiss and moan, so forth (all noise approximate to the hairs of ear and inner ear's solitude). Painting presents perhaps a window, a cupboard of gathered flattened objects which one might (but cannot) touch, perhaps a likeness of ancestral ghost, a *sign* of what might have been, might be. Sculpture presents the very (coldly) touchable thing as object itself—a stand-in which might be mistaken on sight as such, for animal being (Pygmalion). Architecture, then, that which surrounds the living being and all such objectification as it has gathered—presents a womb, as it were, as well as tomb of the mind's mathematics...externalizing numbers into space, numb thought's otherwise endless flights of fancy. And Poetry?—the very exteriorization of thought process, both halves of the brain (the right, rhythmed, musically wired, and the compartment left) at *one* in ordering the chamber-music-muscularity of throat apparatus, tongue, teeth, to exquisite grunts of meat-thought-staccatos. Dance, similarly, best organizes the exterior body to mimic its innards, most usually prompted by Music's rhythm-mimesis of same.

And Drama?—Drama, that least evolutionary of *all* the Arts, deserves our special study. Drama is, as everyone knows, that form of Human expression which most times presents our everyday-and-nightmare-night's imagined outer world (the "mirror held up to nature," as it were, is, and ever shall be). The right of ritual is its actuality as immediate event—that, perhaps, is why it cannot evolve—also that it most depends upon topically gathered audience, entertainment ambiance, to exist.

Once Music centers itself in other-than-rhythm-*number*, to the extent of imagined spatial, and centers as subtly as to accommodate articulately the pulse of sounded textures (vibratory wave-lengths in juxtaposition as *space*, an *invented* space, i.e., neither seen *nor* sensorially heard), once a grid-of-habit has suggested an extra-intellectual experiencing of it (of a spiritual inventory, so to speak) it, then thoroughly composed, can engender an aesthetic experience, i.e., a conceptual equivalent of sense input. To be blunt, once sounds are no longer speech-in-audio-hyperbole and/or the rhythmic tutor of dance, nor the occasion of any other social usage, Music can so tickle the brain as to engender a feeling of rightness (and of no other meaning whatsoever) sufficient to be that "legal" variability of Known (tone-row, metronome/whatever) which constitutes delightful synaptic surprise to the mind. By "legal" I mean that those "aberrations" of new musical order must conform to the known as surely as the surprising variations of glass in rippling water conform to the known glass under water (to borrow an Ezra Pound metaphor): variables, each rip and twist of glass-form *must* seem inevitable in the beseeming infinity of torqued rippling.

Now, I think it is clear that while Music maintains audible corollary of nerves-as-roots in the physiology of the artist, the aesthetic of organized sound is, most naturally, an inspiration dedicated to such freedom-of-expression as prompts thought's sense of rightness...i.e., sense of finite variation with*in* the humanly comprehensible ("...the outside limits of being human" as poet Charles Olson put it). Music, which very *easily* tickles music into dance, and/or extends the tonal range of language into song, does *rather* tend (at center of its historical evolution) to eschew these virtues (or to subsume them into) a presentation of pitched spatial and rhythm temporal comprehensions (for aesthetic experiencing).

And, if it be true that "All arts aspire to Music," need I write more?...

Paint's styles of surface fret (the hand-writ of the painter) or invented depth (ever more and more elaborate in varieties of historical—i.e., emblematic—trickery) or symbolic color, assignment of form (as representational signifier...the very signature of the artist up-front, a warning 'gainst "window shopping"), all such, and many other artist tactics, counteract Painting's easiest illusion meanings. Sculptors ever more and more adamantly, and again and against, center their Art in the revelation of stone, wood, metal...(when Michaelangelo's "Pieta" began to be worshipped he carved "Made by Michaelangelo" across the breast band of the Virgin).

"Architecture is frozen music," says Goethe—i.e., what he honors of it is art.

Poetry is enabled to make new grounds for interpretive sense precisely because at scratch it eschews any such usage as currently common sense of the language, opts rather for right brain's neuron song...rummaging the left hemisphere for only that language which will suffice rhythmically/texturally in orchestral support of the song schema.

Dance stances, creates the great defiance of gravity illusion: and when that petrifies into tutus so forth, Isadora Duncan takes her prime inspiration from Greek friezes.

Only the theatre of Gertrude Stein's "closet drama" (in the tradition of Strindberg, Wedekind, Buchner, Yeats) can *perhaps evolve* Drama itself out of the soup of Polis, "the soaps," the soap-box.

Which brings us to consideration of Motion Pictures—ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths per cent Theatrical, not essentially different from the fast-changing sets of Max Rheinhardt and Co., essentially still an experience akin to watching a stage-play thru a variety of opera-glasses controlled by the director-editor of the movie being passively watched.

When I was young, we used to make a distinction between stagy "escape" entertainment (most often called Photo-plays) and the possibilities of a moving picture Art (which we called Films).

The Chinese have a beautiful glyph for their movie-designation: "Electric Shadows." But it hasn't seemed to help them make anything of lasting visual value in their whole known filmic history.

The French term "cinematographer" means "writer of movement" and, indeed, most of their motion-picture making (past George Méliès) stays stuck to Literature, theatrical or otherwise.

The most aesthetically hopeful definition of Film I've found is Bill Wees' "Light Moving in Time"—as is the title of his book on the subject (published by University of California Press, Berkeley).

Note that it is *not* ordinarily any semblance of moving light which we witness watching movies. Rather we see silhouettes flickering various characters of motion within transparent back sets or foreground blockages, all back-lit by a rectangle of projected illumination. Light, steadily contained in its flattened box of screen is most usually interfered with, smudged and dyed, by photographic spectrum and shadows representative of nameable forms. The staggered (frame-by-frame) movement of these forms is only a *very* subtly visible (twenty-four frames per second) metronome reference to clockwork, thus obliquely to mechanical Time.

Why, then, do I find "Light Moving in Time" to be the best definition of Film? Because I am primarily interested in the aesthetic possibilities of the medium, and these are those which promote mental reflection (rather than reflective recollection).

The brain IS light (wave/particle) in electric (synaptic) movement: the movements (electrical investments) are as infinite as the possible neural connections, but its lightning-like activity is specifically paced (by the ABC's of its waves and the outside limits of its variable seizures) and thus Timed, finite!

Each brain's main job is reference (thus re-presentational) but its life unto itself is that of Timed Light. Its electric moves react to input: thus the senses impose wavery particulars upon the contained free-play of illumination. Its physiology (and that of the whole nervous system) composes, the very shapes of cells being something of a fret pattern to contain this all-sensory storm of sparks, to impose, for example, visual form.

Visual Forms, reinforced by similarity of eye input (into content), interplay with the prime cognition that "All that is is light" (Dun Scotus

Erigena). This interplay is the balance/counter-balance of any brain's genetic cultural individual "dance," and this, therefore, stance-dance would seem to be the only fully meaningful (i.e., means-less-usage) entertainment available of cognition (as distinct from re-cognition).

Film ought aesthetically to exist flickering electric and free of photographic animation, free of the mechanical trickery of, the outright fakery of the illusion of movie pictures. All interferences with The Light (all shaped tones and formal silhouettes) ought to be an illumination of source-as-light (or at least be subservient, as symbol, say, representatives of Time, to Light's life...as is, to be sure, the almost equal space of Black in the projection of every split second of lighted frame). The light, then, would be seen to move because of the light-signifying shapes and tones in their signatory continuities (especially if these were tones in visual chromatic harmony, and shapes in evolutionary form at one with illumination). This anyway, is the aspiration of artists whose Art aspires to Music, and "Art is art-as-art. And everything else is everything else" (Barnett Newman, painter, sculpture).

PAINTING FILM (1996)

If it be an art, then it is intrinsically aesthetic, requiring aesthete—that is to say, it is beautiful, integrally balanced, and (as unique) of some individually discovered integrity: its appreciator is one who is capable of sensory justice and evolutionary thought, free from dogma and representational bias, because the art work's this-for-that is not clock-like but rather evolves eccentrically within, and only within, the limits of being Human. Art forms and colors, or rhythms and tones of words, progress asymmetrically or eventually settle into some complexity of beseeming haphazard composure. The art work defines a paradigm of the experienced chaos of everyday life while being in itself a construct quite distinct from it.

The salad is on the table, every ruffled edge of lettuce crisp with the glitter of its own being-at-one with water and/or overlay of oil.

Musically, such crispness can translate pizzicatto, or into some slow uncoil of overall (say oboe) curl of tone, some tone of green punctuated by drum, and so on, or it can just be distorted by dream—the limp-lettuce nightmare, crack and timbre reverberation in phosphor glint of cathected leafage, soforth.

Were I to paint the plein-aire abstraction of this (as I do) onto a strip of film, my whim would be to absorb what could be seen of such lettuce, its surrounds of table and all, the very room, and then to allow into my consideration the movements of such absorption—the shifts of eye in contemplation, the electrical discharges of synaptic thought, the "translations," as it were, from optic imprint to memorabilia.

For color ("magic markers," dyes, india inks) I choose greens, yes, but vein them with yellows and ruffled shadow-black, applying isopropyl alcohol on a twisted pointed Kleenex to thin dye lines, smudge the tones or (with alcohol flicked from a thumbed toothbrush) create circles to dab into partial-circle-curves or (with weakened, spit-diluted alcohol) do manage filigrees midst mixes of conglomerate color. Sometimes varieties of tone are marked directly upon the transparent "palette" (or clipboard which holds the film-strip), so that I can then make toned puddles of alcohol to dip the film into, feathering the shapes with quick twists of the wrist, pressing the film so that the dyes collect as edges to half-dried shapes, and so on. More often than not the alcohol is used to erase an entire frame or collection of frames which have, so it seems, come to naught.

There is very little of "lettuce" left after all this, but when successful, the truths of moving visual thinking are made manifest along a strip of film.

As to the "table," strips of adhesive tape provide varieties of straight lines, after applied dyes, in mimic of eye's slippage—brevities of "cubism," if you will, in Time...continuities of cubistic envisionment when flashed (twenty-four frames a second) through the projector and upon the motion-picture screen. Very little of geometry survives "translation" into organic thought, so it seems to me. The meat of the mind (at least my mind) puts curve to linearity, blurs hard-edge perception; but the thought of (for example) "the shortest distance between two points" prevails in a mix of cellular irregularities sufficient to necessitate its occasional representation.

The table is in the range of nomenclature "yellow brown"; but the eye's retention of yellow is blue, and the after-image of brown is often something I call "red-black"—a very muted red, to be sure...more in the range of purple, say—actually unnameable. The shifts of tone, as the mind absorbs, is understandably variable along a strip of film, but almost always tending to recycle its orders, like the pitches of a tune, but a tune undergoing melodic variations. These variations are subject to interruptions by absorption of all other tones (and shape shifts) of the surrounding room (for shape does surely affect reception of tone...and tone of tone in color-chordal variance)

The plate upon which the salad sits (oval-shaped, as it happens) presents curves which tighten in relation to each other as if pulled string-to-bow, becoming variances of interruptive "horizontals," "verticals," "diagonals" (as we name them—mimicking the language of painting and still photography) in the field of compositional logic for film. Semi-dried "magic markers" can effect a line quite similar (on this small scale) to brush-stroke; but these I tend to smudge with alcohol twist of Kleenex until they more nearly approximate some sense of optic flickering of such. As the plate is "white," and the film strip transparent film-leader, I delicately scratch at the lines of the "stroke," so to speak.

The truth of the "plate" is that it affects visual absorption of the lettuce very much like a break in the sight-lines, distraction from forms, rhythmically castanet-like, because otherwise its paradigm on film, its variable oval, would act as container—a word appropriate to its service vis-à-vis lettuce (appropriate surely in language and perhaps to description of snapshot) but absolute non-sense in respect to moving visual thought process. Such containment would preclude the peripherally perceived effects of the room, the in-pouring light of the world beyond, the process of memory and expectation; and thus would obliterate Time.

I haven't really written about the paradigmatic play of memory in this process of painting a film...nor do I intend to now; but suffice it that "lettuce" perceived as a word and lettuce seen across any (however limited) "space of time," like we say, constitute two entirely different processes of thinking.

Let me end on three "Tender Buttons" by Gertrude Stein:

MORE

An elegant use of foliage and grace and a little piece of white cloth and oil.

Wondering so winningly in several kinds of oceans is the reason that makes red so regular and enthusiastic. The reason that there is more snips are the same shining very colored rid of no round color.

A NEW CUP AND SAUCER

Enthusiastically hurting a clouded yellow bud and saucer, enthusiastically so is the bite in the ribbon

OBJECTS

Within, within the cut and slender joint alone, with sudden equals and no more than three, two in the center make two one side.

If the elbow is long and it is filled so then the best example is all together.

The kind of show is made by squeezing.

THE LOST FILMS (1996)

The Lost Films is a series of nine untitled films, from the late 1980s through to 1995, which are photographed and/or painted, sometimes painted-over photography—and are "lost" in the sense that, across the whole period of time, I could not manage nor imagine any way to pay for printing them. Finally a C.R.C.W. University of Colorado sabbatical grant allowed me to take them out of "the lost drawer" in my office, string them together chronologically, and send them on to Western Cine labs.

From the late '80's on I've had to determine which films of my working would, when finished, be printed. I have exercised the strict discipline that such "publication" would entirely depend upon whether or not I had sufficient money available at the time any given film was finished. These films, then, happened to be put into "the lost drawer" by economic (rather than aesthetic) determinants. They were, for a while, then, deliberately "forgotten" by me so as not to depress me and therefore suppress the possibilities of my continuing work, and are, now that I'm enabled to bring them to light, a collection of many surprises to me as well as a collective surprise: they share a quality that supports the term "lost" in more than one sense, which determined their collective title—an emphemerality of being extraordinarily appropriate to the term "films"...a quality which seems, in a variety of ways, given over to the unconscious, elusive to the distinguishments of logical conscious appreciation.

I have noticed, over my entire film-making lifetime, that every now and again a film of mine seemed to exist, vis-a-vis audience attention, in such a way that only a few viewers would remember it at all, even immediately following the program in which it was introduced—an existence none would mention save in the vaguest terms, nor would ever acknowledge or critique in print. My natural supposition was that these films were "weak" in some way, perhaps even defective; but then I did begin to notice also that defects in more memorable films of my making, even works (such as *Anticipation of the Night)* quite crippled by error, were thoroughly critiqued, immediately and ever after. I finally came to the sense that there were some films which just naturally seemed to slip past any easy consciousness of most viewers and to, thereby, lodge (perhaps "hide" is a better word) in the (dare I say "collective"?) unconscious. I too would tend to forget them, or if I did remember them it was very much as one would make special effort to protect or to socially nurture a neglected child. I began to "take notice" and to study these "shy" films (as they began to seem to me), these works which seemed unusually "buried" in themselves not obscure in any particular way, nor weakened by excesses of my solipsism, but rather formed as if of fold-over patterns, or close-foliating forms, eschewing the usual evolutionary tactics of a continuity art. They seemed, as I viewed them again and again, to tend to exist in the mind as if everything of them, in them, were happening all at once!

I began to re-study the music of Anton Webern, much of which I'd always heard as if *listening* to a mobile sculpture—always, yes, turning, evolving, never the same in each "round," clearly existent in time continuum, ever suggestive of infinite juxtapositions in space, yet always memorably audible (as a mobile is visible) in entirety.

I re-read Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, concentrating particularly on those passages which establish that the dream content is most often prompted by the daily sights and incidents little noticed by the prospective dreamer. It is our daily peripheral vision which often provides the sights that seed the night brain. That which is "overlooked" (midst a daily scheme of continuous sightings) seems better enabled to activate the unconscious and, during sleep, act as a catalyst for the dream release of repressed memories: these memories come then, according to Freud, in disguises which, once noticed, yield not only the repressed experiences but symbolic reference to the cause of such repression.

Dream analysis is a lengthy process because some of the ordinary daily rituals of casual recognition must be avoided as the individual (1) seeks to remember the dream—i.e., put together the members of it much as a paleontogist might assemble the bones of an unknown creature; (2) tries to envision this creature-dream eventuality very much like the Chinese invented their linguistic characters—i.e., as pictures behaving most often as verbs, as flashes of referential/nameable objects and beings, things, caught in maximum expression of movement; (3) accepts the disguises of said dream content as if it were of revelatory value, at least equal to the "true" identity of the remembered vision—keeping the interpretation of the dream *in movement* and *fixed status* at once in one's mind, thus abnegating normal causal logic, narrative dramatics, so forth, in sincere acceptance of the intrinsic timelessness of the imagined unconscious; and (4) insistently relates all this yield of personal memory to the essentially "overlooked," unremarkable, barely noticed, initially disregarded whatever which sparked the dream, as one had, say, sidled by it on one's day-dreaming way.

All of my "unremarkable" films share a common trait: each was a "turning point" in my creative process—a "seed," as it were, of future making.

The aesthetician Fred Camper is among the very few to have written about *Nightcats* (1956): "...cats at night become...haunting, demonical: *they seem to be symbols of something or things which are not identified*" (my italics). *Nightcats* is certainly the "turning point" in my work, which makes the later seminal *Anticipation of the Night* possible.

Films by Stan Brakhage: An Avant Garde Home Movie (1961) engenders the whole aesthetic possibility of *Songs* (1964-1969), with *Oh Life—A Woe Story—The A Test News* (1963) "paving the way" for the *23rd Psalm Branch* of that *Songs* series. Are these "shy" works to be regarded as "sketches," then, for future fully realized films? No—for *Oh Life...* has very little technical or aesthetic resemblance to the *23rd Psalm Branch*, and only the title extension, "*An Avant Garde Home Movie*," has any relationship to *Songs. Nightcats* is theatrical in a particular way which *Anticipation of the Night* eschews.

There is a 1965 film, *Black Vision,* based on a passage of Sartre's novel *Nausea,* which (though unremarkable) hasn't so far produced any furtherance of making: it is a "turning point" in the sense that it, like the much celebrated *Blue Moses* (1962), ends possibilities of future making, narrative and the theatrical. *Black Vision* exists, despite Sartre, as a work wherein almost all images "seem to be symbols of something or things which are not identified."

But I only became aware of what I sometimes call "visual ineffables" in my work when I first showed the film *Nodes* (1981), a four-minute hand-painted film. It was premiered in the middle of a Millennium Film Workshop program in New York City, and although it was the only hand-painted film on the program, not a single person afterward remembered having seen it. In my program description of the film I used the word "cathexis" for the first time in a film blurb. This whole Freudian psychological concept is evoked in an attempt to elucidate the creative process that produced the film and to resonate with the title word, "node," which Webster's defines as "*a point at which subsidiary parts originate or center*" (my italics).

The "subsidiary parts" seem to me a fair corollary of the previously mentioned peripheral visions, unacknowledged sights, which collect a whole host of associative memories and thus seed dreams. The Greek word "cathexis" (as Freud uses it) seems to suggest "holding," or "investment," at the moments of neurological synapse, but it also suggests "haunt." Are these little overlooked films, then, akin to ghosts—now you see them/now you don't? But isn't that notion intrinsic to cinema in general?

The capacity to remember *any* imagery from the flowing-river experience of motion pictures is exactly dependent upon one's capacity to *name* what one has seen. A picture is (as I define it) a collection of *nameable* shapes framed (i.e., in interrelated composition). But it is almost impossible to name the *motions* of these shapes-as-things in other than the most general way ("fast, slow," "up," "down," "jerky," "smooth," "right," "left," and so forth); and the motion nomenclature almost invariably suggests dualities—duels of opposites. The possibilities of truly *moving* pictures are limited in remembrance to a point-counterpoint comprehension—at the very center of what Film intrinsically *is:* stop/start, on/off...of light.

Only a ghost film could possibly break through thought-bonds of language and exist as, say, movement haunt, tone-texture haunt, ineffable-haunt. The sense of such a film might naturally exist within the spectator, very like the kind of passing image which prompts dreams that *cannot* be verbalized to one's breakfast companion or psychoanalyst. Such a film might eventually prompt whole new ways of recollection that are essentially free from language—indeed might prompt whole new definitions of what "language" might eventually come to be...an un-nouned, non-dichotomous series of light-glyphs available for arrangements of cathectic exchanges which directly reflect each person's synapsing inner nervous system.

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FRED CAMPER

Brakhage's Contradictions

1.

Stan Brakhage is among the most inclusive of filmmakers. The almost omnivorous impulse behind his choices of subjects and styles makes it difficult to characterize his work in particularizing terms. Included in his films are the sun and the moon, television images, mountains, children on a merry-go-round, open-heart surgery, domesticated animals, a movie theater, tiny blood vessels, portraits of friends, abstract replications of "closed-eye vision," still photos of family members, Alaskan glaciers, Freud's house in Vienna, the filmmaker himself taking a leak, a Paris cemetery, Colorado's governor, childbirths, urban skylines, footage taken by his children, frames of solid color, found footage from an instructional film, and the filmmaker Paul Sharits making love with his wife. While many of Brakhage's films contain no representational images, others are photographed in a manner most would call reasonably "realistic." Underlying all of his films is an impulse to include the richness and variety of a fully lived life, from mundane experiences of dailiness, to images drawn from dreams, to attempts to produce abstractions unlike anything he's seen or imagined before.

At close to 400 films, his oeuvre can seem confusing, and it may be that only Brakhage himself has seen every one of them. I find it useful to divide his output into two categories: the "main line" and "applied Brakhage." The "main line" represents most of his greatest work; it consists of films that evidence a quest which, while difficult to pin down, has an "isolating" and "abstracting" tendency that at least superficially seems to contradict the inclusiveness their variety of subjects would suggest. Key "main line" films include *Anticipation of the Night* (1958); *The Art of Vision* (1965); *The Horseman, the Woman, and the Moth* (1968); *The Process* (1972); *The Riddle of Lumen* (1972); *Aquarien* (1974); *The Text of Light* (1974); the photographed numerical series of the late 1970s and 1980s such as *Romans, Arabics,* and *Egyptians*; most of the parts of "..." (1998); many of the recent handpainted films; and the two photographed series of the last decade, *Visions in Meditation* (1989-90) and the "Vancouver Island films" (1991-2000). In each of these very different films one gets the sense that Brakhage has pushed his vision to a new level of isolating intensity. The images they contain are severed from previously predictable ways of knowing; in each film he reinvents his vision by explicitly undercutting any expectations (about subject-matter, composition, rhythm, and so on) created by his previous work.

The "applied" films, in which he uses some aspects of his already-established style to render an individual subject, include *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959); "portrait" films such as *Song 24* (1967), *Hymn to Her* (1974), *Clancy* (1974), and *Gadflies* (1976); the stunning nature film *Creation* (1979); and the 1971 "Pittsburgh documents" (*eyes, Deus Ex,* and *The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes*). Most of these are wonderful films in themselves, and one can find here, more than in the "main line" films, particular attitudes expressed toward specific themes. In *The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes,* there is a tension between the awfulness of corpse imagery seen during an autopsy and Brakhage's attempt to create a light-poem out of these human fragments, but this approach will already be familiar to viewers of the more extreme vision of death presented through images of a dog decaying in the woods in the rhythmically tortured *Sirius Remembered* (1959). There is a powerful moment in *The Act of Seeing,* in which a face is lifted off a skull during an autopsy, that finds its analogue in brief images of the dog's skull in *Sirius.* But those images in *Sirius* have the quality of genuine apparitions: because of the way they interrupt the camera's wildly swooping arcs, they are experienced as perceptual events that impinge on the viewer's entire sensorium. In comparison, the autopsies in *The Act of Seeing* come across as little episodes of narrative storytelling. Not surprisingly, some of the applied films are relatively accessible to new viewers, which may explain why they are among the Brakhage films that are most frequently screened (e.g. *The Act of Seeing* and *Window Water Baby Moving*). The "applied" films draw on Brakhage's major achievements, and are an integral part of his oeuvre, but what they don't do is push into the unknown.[1]

One characteristic of a "main line" film is that it has the feel, when first shown, of being unlike anything previously seen. Objects and images in them have the quality of newborns, previously unconceived of entities that require the viewer to perceive them without reference to previous contexts, habits, or expectations. The drive here, which does not always lead to abstraction, is more generally toward severing an image from all the "givens" we use to understand the things we see—such as the received tropes of mass-media imagery or the functional seeing we use to navigate daily spaces. A Brakhage image of a house is most often stripped from its context: not only do we not see the yard, but the porch might be a bit out-of-focus, and there's no build-up of its volume through the intercutting of diverse camera angles. Instead, the viewer is offered a fragment that presents itself both as an image of the object it contains and as a fragile mental construct, a composition that feels like it's been dreamed into being more than it feels like a photograph of a thing. Brakhage removes his images from the familiar to charge them with a more visionary life—to "make it new," in the phrase of Ezra Pound, one of Brakhage's major influences. The abstract *Arabics* undercut expectation by working with lights at the edge of the frame as well as at the center, presenting compositions that are not easy to absorb in a glance.[2] More generally, Brakhage's cinema defies expectation by undercutting whatever might seem to be its own "rules": some of his films *do* include images of both a house and its yard.

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[1] Of course, these categories are imprecise, and there are many hybrids too: the serial works *Scenes From Under Childhood* (1967-70), *Sincerity* (1973-80), and *Duplicity* (1978-80), seem to straddle this division, pushing forward at times and applying already-established techniques at others. Similarly, certain of the other "Songs," *Songs 21* and *22* (1965) for example, and certain of the other portrait films, such as *Dominion* (1974), clearly belong in the "main line."

[2] See http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/Brakhage.html, reprinted in the booklet, "Film Preservation Awards 2001" (NY: Anthology Film Archives, 2001).

Most often—and this is one way that inclusiveness reenters—the abstracting drive realizes itself in terms of contradictions. For almost any generalizing statement one might make about a major Brakhage film, some form of its opposite is also true. *The Text of Light* is abstract? It's full of hints of landscape. Most of Brakhage's films are silent? True, but their rhythms evoke music. They are "pure"? But they are full of little jokes, if one knows how to spot Brakhage's humor. They are "transcendent" to the point of neo-Platonism? But they include thoroughly modernist acknowledgements of their materials. They are anti-dramatic? Yes, but what about the four-part *Faust* series (1987-89)? Moreover, even his abstract works contain "dramatic" moments of formal contrast and conflict that set up expectations for resolution, though a simple resolution rarely if ever comes. Instead, the contradictions prevent any singular interpretive line suggested by the images themselves from attaining stability or authority.

At the beginning of his first and best-known book, *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), Brakhage asks, in what has become his most frequently quoted statement, "How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'?... Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word.'" Even though a scant two paragraphs later he continues, "one can never go back, not even in imagination," his question has often been misconstrued as staking an impossible claim for recapturing the pre-linguistic eyesight of children, when in fact he makes it quite clear that he's pursuing a necessarily imperfect adult attempt to re-envision such eyesight even after, or in spite of, the acquisition of language: "I suggest that there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word" (*EB*,12).

The notion that language and imagery exist in a paradoxical and possibly antagonistic relationship to each other has been explored throughout the history of avant-garde filmmaking (Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* [1926] and Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* [1970] are salient examples). As with most filmmakers who deal with this issue, Brakhage doesn't so much create imagery utterly foreign to language as place the question of linguistic meanings in tension with elements that push against or beyond such relationships and structures. Even his abstract images often suggest nameable shapes, and those that move away from that tendency (the *Arabics*, for example) do so at least in part through a kind of contrariness that can still be partially apprehended analytically, for example by noticing how the changes in the compositions and rhythms refocus one's attention in ways that seem foreign to the qualities of linguistic relationships. But more importantly, the question of whether Brakhage's images and sequences generate relationships and meanings that have a linguistic quality is not as central as is sometimes imagined, and is in fact only one small component of a much larger project. We should look to the way his opening question in *Metaphors on Vision* sets up an opposition between learned or accustomed seeing and the kind of vision that he strives for, rather than to the specific terms of that query, to begin to take a full measure of his achievement.

The dualism between language and vision that Brakhage poses, which is most often present in his films as a split between (1) objects seen and used according to their names and (2) objects presented as varieties of pure light, is really only one of a panoply of related dualisms that thread their way through his oeuvre, multiplying and growing more complex as his work has evolved. His films juxtapose entities that might be described as solid objects (whether recognizably nameable or abstract) with compositions that have a more continuous or allover pattern. Compositions that seem to contain solid and palpable objects and surfaces are paired with layered images that remind one of the transparency of the film strip. Sequences in which images seem to pass smoothly from one to the next yield to sequences whose breaks and discontinuities seem baffling at first. All of these feed into a more fundamental set of dualisms that generate the contradictions that define his work, contradictions between the expected and the unexpected, the limnable and that which is beyond measure, the known and the unknown.

These contradictions are embedded throughout the work, within rhythmic sequences and in the structure of individual images, but they are perhaps most evident in editing juxtapositions. The viewer watches an image of shimmering water and thinks "transparency," and then a solid head bobs up between the waves. Just when a relatively consistent rhythm might, if continued, cause a little toe-tapping, an almost unfathomably still image intrudes. The moment a recognizable image of something has been held for so long that it's beginning to turn into what Brakhage refers to as "picture," he cuts away.

But for all this, the films are hardly experienced as presenting stark oppositions. In addition to these complex networks of contradictions and parallels, or perhaps even because of them, his greatest films (including the very short ones, such as *Aquarien* or *Coupling* [1999]) have a synoptic, almost "oceanic" quality. This results in part from the fact that Brakhage doesn't arrange the oppositions as pieces of some intellectual puzzle; rather, they are presented as signposts of extremes which allow the filmmaker to articulate the gap between them by including a variety of expressions situated at various intermediate points. Even Brakhage's "abstract" films have enough variety of pattern, space, and rhythm to make them seem surprisingly inclusive.

The experience of viewing a Brakhage film is not unlike plunging into a rushing stream. One knows that stream water won't suddenly freeze, just as one knows that a Brakhage film won't switch to clips from *Titanic*, but the particular nature of the flow can't be predicted exactly. His films are immersive; they confound the usual distinctions. Observing Brakhage's debt to the poet Charles Olson's notion of a "human universe," R. Bruce Elder writes

> Brakhage's rapidly evolving, perpetually regenerating forms suggest the same surrender of the ego, the same felt relation to the world, the same imbeddedness in flux, and the same sense that one's sensations really are the experiences of the universe experiencing itself from a particular vantage point. In this "human universe," humans are both the instruments and the objects of discovery; here the invidious distinction between subject and object has no purchase on reality.[3]

Brakhage's films don't pose questions (a relationship with the viewer that would suggest linguistic structures, and some form of subject-object separation); rather, they undermine any answers the viewer might obtain from the film with a barrage of new questions. A cut between apparently opposing or contradictory images will most often yield to a third that neither synthesizes nor resolves the earlier contradiction, but rather engages the viewer in a new mystery.

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[3] R. Bruce Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1998), p. 380.

Brakhage's mediation between oppositions and his avoidance of predictability have several consequences. That the viewer is given a more active role than in more conventional films should be apparent. But the viewer is not asked to make decisions about plot or character, or to make up the film's story (as Christopher Maclaine asked of his audience in his early, blackly humorous masterpiece *The End* [1953]); rather, these films ask the viewer to allow herself to be filled with a flood of images that has all the uncertainty of life itself. Whereas a conventional narrative film sets up a conflict that causes a tension that demands release, Brakhage denies this kind of "suspenseful" expectation, and instead plunges the viewer into a near-chaos of continuous change. A central characteristic of the evolution of his style over the past fifty years is an increasingly broad attempt to undercut viewer expectation. In his earlier, post-1958 work he directed expectation away from the broad arc of a narrative toward individual sequences. In many later films, even sequences don't develop according to predictable patterns; the viewer's attention is instead deflected to each fragment of a second, each tiny visual variation, and ultimately to small areas within the image.

At any moment of one of Brakhage's films, it's never really a question of deciding between transparency and solidity, or regular and irregular rhythms. One of the most profound aspects of Brakhage's cinema is that extremes which should logically exclude each other are felt to be "true" at every moment. Just as light can be both a particle and a wave, so a Brakhage image, viewed in context, tends to include oppositions, resulting in a kind of "having it all" vision that doesn't exclude the validity of seeing only a single aspect. The swimmer's head that appears in an orange sea in "..." *Reel 3* is certainly a head, and seeing it as a head opens up a whole series of possibilities, including a recognition of the extent to which a human form seems like an anomalous intrusion onto the water's continuous field. But it's also a shadow, a kind of transparency, part of a flow—though not completely that either because rhythmically it intrudes somewhat as well. Either are true; both are true at once.

A Brakhage film is not a stable object, not a *thing*; rather, it exists in the uncertain space between the images that are physically on the screen and the shifting nature of the viewer's consciousness. This is one reason why different viewers tend to see his films differently, and why a single viewer may see the same film differently on subsequent viewings.[4] While any film can change from one viewing to the next, Brakhage's contradictions explicitly undermine certainty, denying his films the kind of storyboard-like structures that make so many other films (both from Hollywood and from the avant-garde) seem chartable, even scriptable.

Brakhage's lifelong attack on specificities, which gives his films their peculiar mix of precise balance and overwhelming inclusiveness, has a social dimension as well. For one thing, by giving the viewer a more active role, he undercuts the passivity commonly associated with movie-watching. Also, though they are typically seen as "personal" and even hermetic, his films offer an ethos fundamentally at odds with the fetishistic worship of objects in our culture. To view a Brakhage film is to constantly experience deflections of one's gaze: away from a central area or thing to happenings right at the frames' edges; away from one layer of imagery toward another superimposed layer; away from the rhythm of one sequence to a very different rhythm in the next. The attentive viewer cannot remain at rest, and is perpetually discouraged from forming attachments to any image, object, or even rhythmic pattern. Mediating multiple oppositions, and all of the mid-ground as well, the films offer a genuine alternative to the possessiveness of consumerism.

In an assessment of the avant-garde in the early 1980s, Jonathan Rosenbaum identifies "a sort of metaphysical conceit underlying the whole American avant-garde romantic tradition—a central aspect of the work of Brakhage [...] and countless others, which reduces the universe to a list of male possessions: This is my wife, my child, my gun, my dog, my camera, my house, my car, my summer vacation, my life."[5] Clearly, this argument is plausible only if we consider Brakhage's subjects apart from the full import of his style. *Contra* Rosenbaum, a robust opposition to materialism is alive and well in Brakhage's films, as is the Sixties ethos that art can change one's consciousness. Three examples come readily to mind. In *23rd Psalm Branch* (1967) Brakhage presents war images not as static givens but as unbalancing enjambments of forms, creating a perceptually violent experience for the viewer; he explicitly related his film to the Vietnam War when he introduced it at early screenings. At the Pittsburgh premiere of *The Text of Light*, he described this abstract work as a landscape film that critiqued the Western notion of landscape as "real estate" that can be divided, measured, and ultimately bought and sold (*EB*, 82). In *The Lion and the Zebra Make God's Raw Jewels* (1999) he responds to "those horrible animals-eating-animals programs on the Discovery channel," in which "the British narrator's voice says it doesn't really hurt them as you watch them get eaten alive"[6]; he responds, in other words, to static depictions of active nature by making a film the viewing of which is itself a process. The rapid intercutting of handpainted forms suggests ripping flesh; the coming-together of transparent layers makes entirely new entities, "raw jewels." Brakhage's explicit and implicit engagements with the world around him makes it seem especially tragic that his films are so often considered only in terms of the internal history of avant-garde film, or of art, when one thing they more urgently address is our cultural attitudes toward imagery, and the social implications of those attitudes.

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[4] See, for example, a disagreement between P. Adams Sitney and other critics, one of them the present author, over the ending of *23rd Psalm Branch*, in P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*, (NY: Oxford UP, 1979), p. 450-1; I have since concluded that both "opposing" positions are correct.

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[5] Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Film: The Front Line 1983* (Denver: Arden Press, 1983), p. 121.

[6] Phone interview with the author, September 1, 1999.

2.

Turning mostly to handpainted films in the last decade, Brakhage also produced a number of photographed works; the longest of these, a series known as the "Vancouver Island films," offers his imaginary biography of his second wife, Marilyn, who grew up in Victoria, British Columbia.[7] The first, and longest at 80 minutes, *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea* (1991), is Brakhage's envisioning of Marilyn's childhood; the second, *The Mammals of Victoria* (1994), conjures her adolescence; the third, *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* (2000), is on Marilyn's "mid-aged crisis" as Brakhage imagined it.[8] Among his finest works, they are also some of the most underappreciated, in part due to their fractured quality. After multiple viewings, I find each among the hardest of films to fix in memory, because of the spatially disruptive cutting and the diversity of filming styles one finds in them; earlier films with far greater ranges of subject-matter, such as *The Art of Vision*, afford a more continuous flow. Whereas earlier masterpieces such as that film or *The Riddle of Lumen* have a bravura, see-what-I-can-do-with-cinema quality, the "Vancouver Island films" are somber and autumnal in tone.

The two subjects in the title, *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea*, have been central metaphors in various Brakhage films throughout his career. His first frame-at-a-time film, *Mothlight* (1963), consists of bug parts and bits of plants laid between two strips of perforated tape to make a kind of rapidly-moving tapestry, which was then printed for projection; at a public showing in early 1964, he identified its materials as having been gathered "from my garden....and from the garden of my imagination."[9] Flower and plant imagery are scattered throughout subsequent films, and in them gardens generally signify an artful human rearrangement of things. Further, objects purposefully arranged in a home or a room are implicitly compared to gardens in various short portrait films (*Dominion* and *Hymn to Her* are two examples). Water, on the other hand, often shown alongside rocks and other landscape elements, signifies the natural, the given, that which is outside the self—but it is also shown as ever-changing, a sign of natural processes. But if it is a given, Brakhage, who attacks all givens, then tries to film the water in a way that personalizes, even personifies it. In *Creation*, he compares the calving-off of icebergs from Alaskan glaciers to the light-changes he creates on film simply by opening up the lens's iris; the whole film becomes a grand, metaphoric interlacing of the processes of nature and filmmaking. As early as *Song 3* (1964), he was using water as a metaphor for aspects of human consciousness.

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[7] Brakhage filmed every aspect of his domestic life during his first marriage, to Jane; Marilyn does not appear in these films because she doesn't like being photographed. When Brakhage first learned this, he told me, he had "an immense sense of relief. I wasn't obligated to photograph autobiographically anymore."

[8] I have written elsewhere on *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him*—see http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/Brakhage2.html.

[9] Quoted from the author's memory; the showing was at NYU.

A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea asserts through its title a contrast between gentle nature transformed into a garden and a sterner ocean, which is present "not as counter-balance but as hidden generator of it all, of The World to be discovered by the/any child," as Brakhage writes in his note for the film (*CCC*). The ocean, filmed both from the sheltered coast of the area around Victoria and from the Pacific side of Vancouver Island, is hardly at its dramatic fiercest here; nor did Brakhage film during storms—which suggests that the point is to envision the sea's rhythmic and transformative possibilities, rather than being merely awed by towering waves. Water is seen as an image-maker, a filmmaker's partner whose movements and reflections remake compositions (as was the case as early as *Songs 3* and *7* [1964]). When a wave breaks, or when a whale pierces the surface, dark sea is suddenly filled with white foam that becomes moving skeins of light not unlike Brakhage's handpainted patterns. But then the image transforms itself further as the wave recedes or a new wave breaks.

In the "Vancouver Island films" there is a central tension between clusters of related images that at least superficially resemble a conventional "sequence" on the one hand, and the intrusive, interruptive breaks within those "sequences" that tend to separate them on the other. This tension was made explicit in Brakhage's *The Riddle of Lumen* (1972), and has been present in varying degrees in his photographed films since: rather than forcing images to surrender their autonomy to those around them as in classical synthetic montage, each is presented as a *sui generis*, autonomous entity with a unique composition, space, and light.[10] At one point in *A Child's Garden*, dynamic pans and zooms over the sea give way to more static images of water, which are then followed by a dramatic, close, handheld camera movement over a grassy landscape. The Brakhage of four decades ago might have linked movements over water to similar movements over grass, thereby suggesting a transcendent self whose consciousness and body are capable of reshaping the outer world—though even in the earlier films such attempts are juxtaposed with indications of their failure; *Anticipation of the Night*, with its suicide ending, offers the most explicit example. But here, as in many of the films of his later decades, this "transcendental" tendency, while still present, is modulated by its opposite: a more modest, observational camera that presents images less as products of a transformative consciousness and body than as visions minimally circumscribed by individual will.

This is tricky business, because anyone could assert of a randomly-assembled collection of images that each lives in its own space and light. But the imagery in *A Child's Garden* is hardly random, and what makes its moments of image-separateness live is that one *does* sense a continuum that unites each composition and sequence. The rhythmic breaks—such as the cuts from a moving shot to a more static one—pull away from sensed connections, not entirely breaking them; such "pulling" proceeds as a presentation of contradictions *and* as a form of "but also," as in "That was one way of seeing water; here's another." This, too, is another form of undermining expectation: the films aren't even consistently organized around contradictions.

In an essay from the early 1990s, musing on one of his great influences, Gertrude Stein, and on how film might truly become "comparable to Literature," Brakhage reformulates and generalizes the question about "green" that he asked in *Metaphors on Vision*:

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[10] See my "Western History and the Riddle of Lumen," *Artforum*, January 1973, pp. 66-71.

> And if a work be abstract—i.e. a take *from*—WHAT possible tactic could energize what would otherwise be decorative imagery with recognizable feeling?
>
> And if a film be rather, illustrative—a series of pictures of nameable forms—WHAT on earth might alleviate the inaesthetic burden of referential nomenclature?
>
> My answer is (as inspired by hers) a freeing of each image (as her each-and-every word) to its un-owned self-life within the continuities (rather than context) of the work. (*EB*, 200-1)

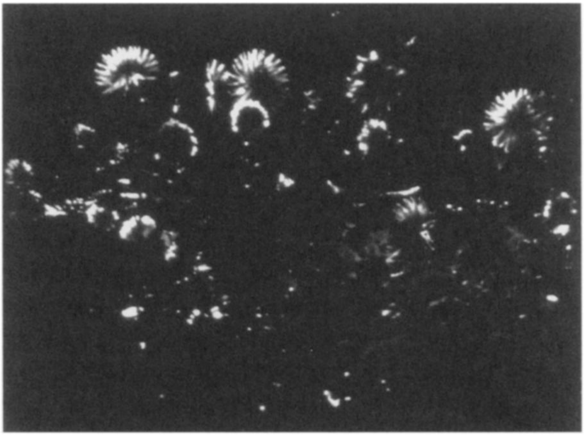
"Un-owned self-life" is key to Brakhage's aspirations for his imagery, particularly in his work since about 1972: no image should be parsable in the way that land can be divided up as "real estate." But this statement should be taken as an aspiration toward the isolating, abstracting pole, not as a denial of all nomenclature. As his note to *A Child's Garden* (quoted above) indicates, Brakhage is fully aware that the sea, the originator and generator of life on earth, brings associations of "eternal"—and he not only uses those associations but also undercuts them by allowing the sea images to pull apart from each other, to pull away from recognizability, to become varieties of foam-and-wave generated light. And the point, as with all of Brakhage's dualisms, is never to choose, but to have both, and all shadings in between as well.

A single moment in *A Child's Garden* is exemplary. We cut from a dark jittery shot of a bird in the sky to a reflection of sun over water. The sun-shape seems to be a continuation of the bird's presence, a matching-on-shape mode common in Brakhage's earlier work, except that not only is the sun's position on the frame *not* matched to the bird's, but also under the water we see a starfish whose visual presence is just as riveting as the sun's. Rather than a smooth flow between visual forms, this cut requires a shift in one's attention: in the second shot, the viewer must decide to focus on either the sun's reflection or the starfish. If the former predominates, the cut suggests a move toward abstraction, toward seeing things as light; and if the latter predominates, the shift from looking through transparent air

to looking through light-altering water offers an almost ecological vision of creatures in their natural settings, at home in the sky or nurtured underwater by the heat and light of the sun. This second connection, from bird to starfish, involves a conceptual, content-based link more than a visual rhyme on central objects. Ultimately, of course, the viewer will experience both possibilities—which is precisely the point. The "garden" of the title refers not only the fragments of the garden we see, but also to the varieties of seeing that the film inventories.

In all three of the "Vancouver Island films," as indeed in most of his work, Brakhage mostly abjures cuts between contiguous views of the same space. Such cutting is a staple of narrative filmmaking that allows the viewer to smoothly navigate in the fictive world; it has also been used to very different ends in avant-garde films as diverse as Peter Kubelka's *Adebar* (1957) and Ernie Gehr's *Table* (1976). When Brakhage does connect contiguous shots, the juxtapositions are usually separated by darker, more abstract imagery, or if he cuts directly, the connected images will feel disconnected because one is significantly brighter or darker, or has a very different kind of movement and perspective, than the other. These changes contribute to the "freeing of each image" by emphasizing their status as film images and de-emphasizing the objects they represent; they also suggest the way shifts in subjectivity alter perception from moment to moment. The viewer, undergoing such shifts, navigates between multiple connections and disconnections, seeing ocean as ocean and also ocean as light.

Rather than grounding each image in the "actual" space or stuff of the world, these disconnections give each image the quality of a mental construct. This has long been a tendency in Brakhage's work, and his various techniques are traditionally identified as ways of "personalizing" photographed imagery. But in these later films a somewhat different goal, inherent earlier, has become evident. The rendering of imagery as fleeting and momentary, emphasized by the way images frequently begin and/or end with fade-ins from or fade-outs back to darkness, contributes to the almost elegiac air of all three of the "Vancouver Island films," and is of course also true to natural processes: a flower is temporary; water is ever-changing. The varieties of sea in *A Child's Garden*—the way it wells up in foam and suddenly fills the frame with light, the way its movements transform the space of the image—suggest a comment not only on the artificial nature of film imagery or the interiorizing nature of human consciousness, but also on the nature of life itself. This *is* some kind of sea, these *are* flowers, yet they feel like illusions, fragile apparitions spun out of nothingness which, in some kind of primal, even Biblical sense, will return to nothingness in the end. Each new wave in the ocean rises up almost arbitrarily, and because it occupies its own unique space and time, it seems momentary; it, and everything else before us, will eventually go back into the sea. Similarly, one "garden" image in *A Child's Garden*, which is cut to from a bleached-out, "overexposed" landscape, consists of a dark shot of some flowers, so dark that only the petals are "correctly" exposed, which makes them seem like miraculous repositories of light, aglow with color. But in the context of the montage, the petals are sensed as momentary blossomings within a surrounding darkness. Images such as this tend to depersonalize the garden, a human creation, by withholding the spatial detail that would allow the viewer to see how the flowers are arranged. Contrarily, the multiple styles in which the sea is presented tend to



personalize it. This split is yet another example of how a Brakhage film negotiates between opposites without achieving any overly simple reconciliation.

The "Vancouver Island films" devote much more of their running time to dark, sometimes indistinguishable forms than my descriptions would indicate. While the alterations of photographic images in Brakhage's earlier films—changing the focus or exposure, separating colors prismatically—interiorize and dematerialize what is seen, in the three "Vancouver Island films" these techniques also have an almost-frightening aspect of negation, as if one's hold on objects, and on life itself, is gradually slipping away. In the tension between solidity and instability that the films navigate, Brakhage's transformations become akin to waves, their brightest and clearest moments akin to sudden and momentary efflorescences of foam, their recessions into darkness akin to the waves' rolling back into the sea. Transforming images into imagined constructs becomes, in the "Vancouver Island films," also a way of envisioning death.

Near the end of his life, summing up the field he created, Sigmund Freud wrote,

> After long hesitation and vacillation we have decided to assume the existence of only two basic instincts, *Eros* and *the destructive instinct*.... The aim of the first of these basic instincts is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus—in short, to bind together; the aim of the second is, on the contrary, to undo connections and so to destroy things.[11]

Brakhage is a longtime reader of Freud, and his combination of unity and disunity, within images and especially in editing patterns, might be thought of in these terms: as his films pull together, they also pull themselves apart, and there's a kind of breaking-down, even a near-chaos, underlying his discontinuities.[12] But Brakhage's apartness is

[11] *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (NY: Norton, 1949), p. 18.

[12] The most explicit example of this is perhaps *The Art of Vision*, whose final section begins with *Dog Star Man, Part IV*, but then proceeds to present its four layers of superimposition in every possible combination, first of three layers, then of two, and finally of one, which is sensed by the viewer as a gradual peeling apart of the richness of life that parallels the film's tragic "plot."

itself bifurcated, including an element not mentioned by Freud. While one aspect of this two-fold "pulling apart" can doubtless be attributed to a pessimism about impermanence connected with the death drive, the other aspect involves a recognition of the particularity of each thing—which is why he avoids editing patterns that will surrender the uniqueness of individual images to a sequence that imposes a dominating, interpretive grid over what is seen. Particularly striking are those images throughout Brakhage's work that have a privileged status within the structure of a film: the movements of a tiny bug, a sand mound's sudden collapse, a particularly stunning cloud formation. Such moments seem to leap beyond the film's existing structure, obliterating whatever interpretations (usually multiple) the previous images had been suggesting. Having begun his film-making career by reading whatever writings of Eisenstein's he could find, late in life he is producing a cinema which argues with its every flicker against the synthesizing imperatives of Eisensteinian montage.

A Child's Garden also contains an explicit response to mass culture. Scattered throughout its second half are images of some kind of theme park, with a painted backdrop, low-slung colored lamps, and fantasy storybook buildings, often with people standing about (in conversation Brakhage has identified this as a "peewee golf course" in Parksville on Vancouver Island). Like the sea, this "location" is presented in many different kinds of compositions, including shots in which colors are separated prismatically. While glimpses of the backdrop and buildings suggest cartoon-like or stage-set imagery, their stasis is almost wiped out by Brakhage's transformations. As he wrote in *Metaphors on Vision*, "Once cartoon sight has been utterly removed, the internal movement of each once-object subjectively reveals itself—an effervescence, an as-if bubbling up-out for viewability of spaceless timeless entities" (*EB*, 32). But here stasis has been almost, rather than "utterly," removed: we see enough to recognize "cartoon sight," which creates still another tension, this time between the fixed, candy-colored pleasures of popular culture imagery and Brakhage's more Heraclitean vision.

The second "Vancouver Island film," *The Mammals of Victoria*, introduces a slightly different tone, including (for example) craggy phallic rocks—Brakhage likely imagining Marilyn's adolescence through metaphors for his own. Though there has long been a phallic component in Brakhage's imagery (Rosenbaum has ungenerously characterized his work as "phallocratic"[47]), the progression in Brakhage's late work has been toward undercutting all object-centered, potentially phallic, images. An angular shot of the sea in *The Mammals of Victoria* includes a distant bather running away at an angle, stumbling as he moves. Then we cut to a darker shot of the sea, seen head-on, a more "eternal" view of waves rolling in. Rather than elevating the bather's presence, or awkwardness, giving it added import, the cut has the effect of undermining it, rendering it even more momentary.[13] Even images that imply the eternal are qualified. In one of the many privileged moments in *Mammals*, a white volleyball bounces back and forth against a blue sky, at first seeming to be mysteriously weightless because the hints of nets and of the hands causing it to move are kept out of the frame until the end of the shot. What had seemed like a miraculous vision is taken, for just a fragment of a section at its end, in the "cartoon" or at least ordinary direction through the revelation of the movement's source; even this most privileged of images is thus contradicted and qualified. In fact, much of Brakhage's humor is based on rendering isolated objects or figures—signs of human (or animal) presence and will—as strangely anomalous, odd intrusions; that such moments are so often the occasion for humor is good evidence for Elder's "surrender of the ego" thesis.

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[13] This cut is visible on the strip as a direct edit, one shot followed immediately by the next, whereas in many of Brakhage's other cuts the two joined shots are separated by one or two frames of darkness. In the last few decades he has used the latter as a way of hiding the visibility of the splice-bar (see plates 7 and 8), which can otherwise be done with a more tedious technique known as A&B rolling. Though most viewers don't literally see the black frames, these cuts are literally separated by a little "blink," contributing to the sense that each shot occupies its own space. The cuts not separated by black were generally made in the camera, the second shot being what Brakhage chose to film after the first; these are also often also marked by a frame a bit brighter than the rest, which results when the camera has not quite come up to speed when recording the first frame. The clues to his working methods thus offered may prove significant; here, this break in the film's continuity is shown to be not a later imposition but a part of his spontaneous thought-process while filming.

Near the end of *Mammals*, a shot through the windshield of a moving car shows light pouring through the opening between trees at the top of a small hill; as the camera approaches, the light gradually brightens. This is followed by a brief image of fire (another form of light [see plate 8]) and a brief handpainted section (Brakhage-made filmic fire). But then the film ends with relatively long takes of dark images that have the faintest hint of landscape, in which horizontal bands of light and dark drift vertically in the frame. Like the move from the stumbling swimmer to a darker sea, this transition defuses the movement through space of that human-made machine, the automobile, by first comparing it to both nature-made and handmade light patterns, and then replacing those with a more "eternal" abstracted landscape that drifts mysteriously in space. The swimmer becomes a dark sea, and a car trip becomes a fuzzy abstracted field, making more explicit than in his earlier work the juxtaposition of the human, personalizing presences of figures and the filmmaker himself with opposing, more ego-less possibilities.

3.

Brakhage's output in the 1980s and 1990s turned increasingly to handpainted films, for a variety of reasons, not the least of them economic: painting and scratching on each frame is so time-consuming that his total output in terms of footage is reduced, thereby lowering his yearly filmmaking expense. While most of these films contain no recognizable objects, in many, fleeting patterns of colors arrange themselves into momentarily purposeful shapes. Many do suggest imaginary gardens (one 2001 work is even titled *Micro-Garden*) and their rhythms have the mix of continuity and discontinuity that characterizes the photographed films as well. Using step-printing to repeat his handpainted frames several times (individual frames are most often held for 1/12th, or 1/8th, or 1/6th of a second), he presents them just long enough for the composition to be apprehended, creating an inherently active viewing experience.

Brakhage's films are held together by a unique combination of composition and rhythm, each considered in relationship to the other.

Yet his rhythms, particularly in recent decades, avoid predictability. As in some earlier films, he still uses contrary patterns to undercut each other; but the recent work is also so resolutely non-systematic as to almost defy conventional aesthetics. But unified they are, around a combination of narrowing and widening, of paring-down and expansiveness. In photographed and handpainted films alike, one feels one is peering at, or through, the eye of a needle, a needle held by a caring but somewhat wobbly hand, whose motions are subject to both organic rhythms and chance fluctuations. The viewer is at once restricted in vision and unsettled in expectation, feeling continually perched on a knife-edge of possibility, with falling off into darkness (which in the films is not always a negative either, as darkness can suggest possibility) an ever-present pole. But the result, within this uncertain flow, is that stunning, almost stupefying apparitions appear, momentary bursts of form and light that suggest, well, a view of an opening flower, an image Brakhage has also literally presented in rare time-lapse imagery of a night-blooming cereus in *The Dream—N.Y.C.—The Return—The Flower* (1976).

The garden metaphor is arguably present in most of the handpainted films, which represent a kind of in-gathering of colors, which are at the same time subject to dispersal and scattering—reflecting, of course, the natural life-cycles of flowers as well.[14] In *Rounds* (2001) mediation between opposites is a central theme. Its form is based on the musical round, which allows identical patterns to be intercut and superimposed to the point that images feel enmeshed in each other, yet the film never feels as if it's literally repeating itself. Towards the end, bright primary colors are juxtaposed so that they seem to both interpenetrate and collide. At first, the colors seem to be opposed, but then they seem to blend; after a while, the viewer begins to feel both apparently opposite relationships occurring at every moment. In *...Prelude 1* (1996), broad forms that seem to have been painted with a wide brush are interspersed with more mottled, bubbly shapes, one piercing the other until they also begin to seem parallel. In *...Prelude 4* (1996), heavily mottled shapes with sharp lines and clear edges are interspersed with smoothly colored lineless shapes. At the outset these are felt as oppositions, but as the film progresses they begin to seem like parallel instances of color whose differences are less significant than their similarities (see plates 9-11).

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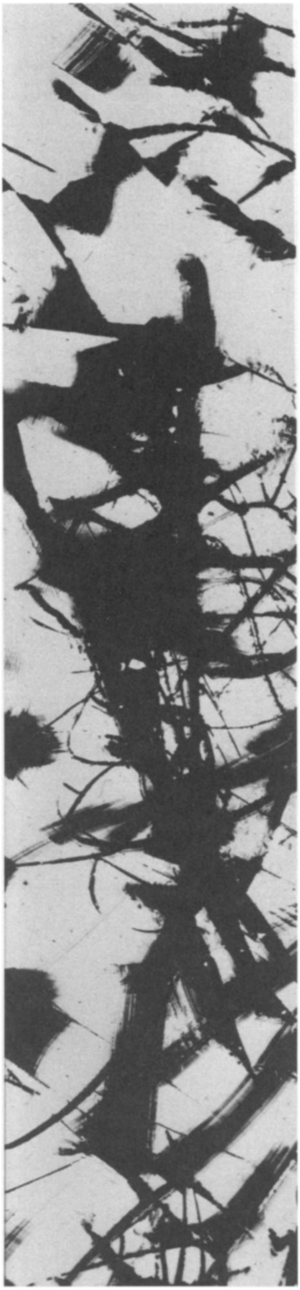
[14] Scott MacDonald perceptively analyzes the ways in which the form of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981) parallels the form of a garden, both within the film and as a viewing experience, in *The Garden in the Machine* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001), pp. 68-73.

In 1996, Brakhage was diagnosed with cancer; he underwent surgery, and thankfully there has been no recurrence. But his surgeon told him that his particular form of bladder cancer is caused by coal tar, a major component of the paints he had been using. Before eventually finding different paints, he began making a film titled simply "...". Also known as the *Ellipsis Series*, its parts are scratched directly into black and gray leader, with color added during the printing process. It now comprises five reels, each of which can be shown individually as well as with others; several of its parts are among his very best works. *Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman not unreasonably asserts a relationship between the series and the paintings of Kline, Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko (*CCC*). But Brakhage spins his own mix of contradiction and mystery here as well. "..." *Reel 2* begins with a thicket of thick black lines on a light pink background. At first these lines have a solidity that suggests the qualities of actual objects, as well as a density and patterning that suggest glyphs from an unknown language. But soon the images reverse polarity, and we see white incised into black, revealing the original source of the shapes (scratches on leader) as well as utterly undermining one's earlier sense of what they were. Some shapes have tiny bands of colors at their edges, and Brakhage shifts startlingly between white or black backgrounds and backgrounds of bright solid colors. Additionally, in many sequences the dark shapes have a white, halo-like glow around them, as if they were blocking a light that illuminates them from behind.

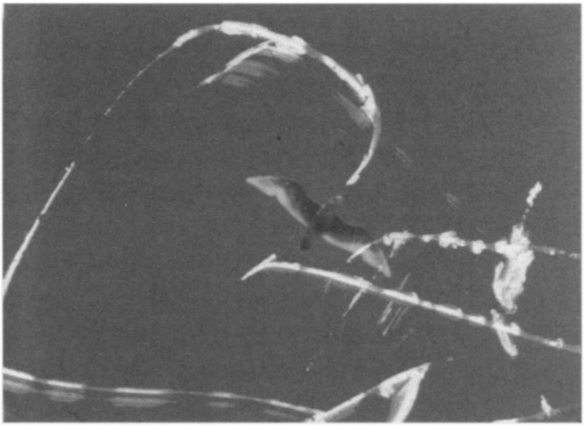
Though the broad, Kline-like "brushstrokes" continue throughout "..." *Reel 2* (often in combination with finer lines), these representational shifts completely undermine any effort to pin down or name what one is looking at. They are objects and scratches, solid and empty, presences and absences; their background is white and black and red; one's perception of positive and negative space is continually switching. The periodic cuts to a colored background



further destabilize and de-objectify. Franz Kline's lines have a visceral and iconic power, in keeping with the fact that the deep shadows cast by Manhattan's old Third Avenue El were one of his inspirations (that El was also the subject, via a "commission" from Joseph Cornell, of Brakhage's early breakthrough film *The Wonder Ring* [1955]). Rothko's glowing rectangles have an intensity and a conviction that if anything surpasses Kline. Each of Brakhage's clusters of shapes is continually replaced by another, undermining the authority of any one composition; but by undercutting any particular reading of what the shapes might be, these shifts magnify their mystery, resulting in a work at least as potent as an Abstract Expressionist painting. Clusters of energy, the shapes serve as magnets for the eyes—which are of course tossed about by each new transition. Rhythm, too, is used to both blend and separate the parts, to unify and disunify the film. Brakhage's long struggle to avoid object-like specificities reaches an apex here, with a series of forms whose very existence seems beyond logical comprehension.

Brakhage has long been a leading advocate for "personal" filmmaking. His use of the handheld camera and the panoply of techniques he developed for altering photographed images have been identified, not least by the filmmaker himself, as ways of expressing the uniqueness of his eyesight and consciousness. Many of his earlier films use camera movement, composition, and editing to filter photographed imagery through a kind of affective gaze: one can usually tell when Brakhage is filming something that he loves, or feels distanced from. But in his later work, pivoting about a transition that occurs in the early 1970s, the expression of emotional states has become increasingly secondary to an interrogation of the nature of existence.

The viewer of "..." *Reel 2* might well wonder, on first viewing, "What the hell was *that*"—which throws a central Brakhage question, that of the relationship between eyesight and consciousness, back on the viewer. In the 1960s Brakhage would urge viewers to go beyond the specific experience of viewing his films so that they could use them as an inspiration for looking at things around them in a new way. His later films challenge the viewer not only to discover new ways of seeing objects or light, but also to discover new ways of doubting. As with Brakhage's best abstract films (such as the photographed *Arabics*), "..." *Reel 2*'s ultimate effect is to dematerialize seeing. Its images don't represent recognizable objects, nor are they static, easy-to-apprehend abstractions; rather, the apparently opposite states of uncertainty and vitality seem to draw energy from each other.



In "..." *Reel 3*, Brakhage combines scratched footage with photographed imagery, and he also scratches directly onto photographed images. An early instance of that combination demonstrates the relationship between Brakhage's personalizing and depersonalizing drives. A long take shows a seagull hovering against a solid blue sky, one edge of its wings white with sunlight. It seems almost weightless, hardly moving. Repeatedly, bursts of white scratches intrude on the screen. Visually discordant, rough-edged, and changing from instant to instant, these jagged scrapings-away of smooth blue sky disrupt the placid scene. Yet one also notices that the scratches, like the gull's sun-filled wings, are white, and seem to hover weightlessly in the image. There's a simple metaphor here, as the filmmaker compares his hand-made scratches to the flight of a gull, and the projector's light that fills his scratches to the sun that illuminates the bird's wings, positing a very Brakhage-like equation between filmmaking and nature—but this comparison is itself undercut by the perceptual experience of seeing the two kinds of imagery as opposites. Each interpretation (equation and opposition) plays off the other, generating contrary meanings. The scratches are in one sense ungraceful compared to the bird, yet their staccato, film-based rhythms are genuinely musical too, and represent something more total (in their ability to wipe out parts of the image and go anywhere within it) and imaginative than anything the bird can physically achieve. The shot lasts just long enough for one to realize, as is so often with Brakhage's oppositions, that all are equally true—and false. As P. Adams Sitney has written, "for Brakhage, dialectical uneasiness is a source of strength."[15]

Later in "..." *Reel 3*, in a juxtaposition which has a similar effect, orange water is interrupted by yellow, green, and white scratch patterns, which include just enough yellow to suggest a connection to the water, and just enough green to further disconnect themselves. Once again, elements are simultaneously coming together and pulling apart. Sitney has remarked that it is in the nature of metaphoric language that it's created on its own failure,[16] a general point that Brakhage clarifies in his own particular way. The bird and the scratches, or the water and patterns, are so different that the metaphors must fail, even while that failure is made part of the image's subject. The juxtapositions create ruptures that are even more obvious than in most metaphors, including those of many earlier Brakhage films. But the juxtapositions also "succeed" on some level—indeed, all photographed imagery is just light patterns on emulsion. The two elements that these sequences include are disparate enough to offer a reflection on the nature of metaphor, while the juxtapositions of metaphoric success and failure suggest an unresolvable paradox that neither offers nor requests a solution.

Brakhage follows the bird-and-scratch image with a shorter section of similar scratches on black, which is in turn followed by a short image of the bird alone. In addition to using the scratches and birds as metaphors for each other, he leaves each in its own space—leaves them free in the "un-owned self-life" he mentions in the Stein essay quoted above. A more academic filmmaker, of which there have been many in the last few decades, would seek to make the sequence didactically obvious by making all three shots equal in length, which would make my metaphor-plus-separation interpretation more evidently sustainable. But Brakhage undercuts every possible specificity—and most especially, anything that can be specified through language. In some ways the particular discrepancies of length that Brakhage chooses here are less important than the fact of the discrepancy. Interjecting such irregularities denies singular, reductive interpretations, which feeds into the films' ever-changing, almost self-consuming, essence.

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[15] *Visionary Film*, p. 199.

[16] Remark heard by the author in the mid-1970s, clarified in a phone conversation with Sitney, October 31, 2001; see also *Visionary Film*, p. 426: "Every metaphor postulates a coherence where it first recognizes a disparity."

4.

In George Landow's *Remedial Reading Comprehension* (1970), titles appear over an image of the filmmaker running. First, we read, "This Is A Film About You," then, "Not About its Maker." One of a group of films that Sitney has called "participatory"(392), it presents an implicit argument against the kind of psychologically oriented autobiography long associated, not without some justification, with Brakhage. But if there can be said to be a defining characteristic that connects most of the major works of American avant-garde filmmaking, it's that they make the process of their viewing a part of their subject. Using a variety of techniques to spur the viewer to greater self-awareness, these films implicitly argue with the supposedly transparent (and frequently soporific) effects of mainstream Hollywood. The panoply of image-altering and abstracting techniques that Brakhage uses certainly has a similar vitalizing effect, though much of his work also includes personalizing, psychologizing elements—even the abstract handpainted films have a sense of duplicating, in their flicker, the mix of intentional and chaotic body rhythms imparted by his handheld camera. Further, there is a way that the staccato effects of Brakhage's editing jar one's perception, preventing his imagery from "entering" one unconsciously. This effect, together with his paradoxical combination of elements, causes the viewer to engage in an active attempt to see, and understand, films that present themselves as unanswerable questions.

Indeed, all the contradictions mentioned can be seen as examples of the grand contradiction negotiated by most of the films and much of the writing. On the one hand, Brakhage's films acknowledge their physicality, revealing scratches as scratches and paint as paint and camera movement and editing as things the viewer is encouraged to notice. The viewer is offered the film not as a *fait accompli* but rather as something whose process he is invited into as a participant; he's encouraged to understand the filmmaker's choices, to see them *as* choices rather than to just, as in a more conventional film, view the results. This helps to "educate" each viewer, freeing him from susceptibility to media manipulation, and encouraging him to make an individual choice—whether that's to see things Brakhage's way, or some other way. On the other hand, all of Brakhage's many contrasts and oppositions have the effect of dematerializing his films. The imagery in the "Vancouver Island films" so often appears out of, and then returns to, darkness, that even something as material as the sea begins to seem like a spider web spun over a void. This is an honest reflection of the physical nature of the film image, which is cast by a fraction of a second of projector light passing through dyes embedded in a narrow strip of plastic. It also acknowledges images as mental constructs, as fragile moments in time that, glimpsed for an instant, will never return. And Brakhage's rhetoric—in both his films and his writings—suggests an interest in the immaterial, the spiritual. Indeed, in recent years he has made a few openly religious films, such as *Christ on Cross* (2001).

Brakhage's best films are so "all over the place" that there is no resting point, even in the brief abstract films that seem relatively homogenous at first. Combining opposite poles in a work is a way of exposing the limits of all rhetoric: if both can be can be true at once, "truth" itself is placed beyond analysis. There are also many moments in Brakhage's work when the structure of the film seems to leap outside of itself. The first moments of painted transformations in *Sexual Meditations #1: Motel* (1970) and *The Wold-Shadow* (1972) are among the more obvious examples—the way, for example, that the separated images of scratch and bird are so much shorter than the earlier combined image in "…" *Reel 3*—but the perpetual shifts take the work out of the realm of the obvious, the limnable, the mappable. Key to the handpainted films is the way their rhythms—which alternate between consistency and breaks, and between images that are more and less easy to glimpse—allow the viewer the confident sense that she is viewing something physically solid before they rush on, leaving her to appeal to after-images, to the imagined or glimpsed auras generated by images that are often just at the point of eluding one's grasp. It is in such fragments of halos, specters of rhythmic sequences just past, hints of things not quite seen, that these works live and breathe. Brakhage's own writing likewise alternates between stressing the importance of his materials and invoking the muse, or "angels"; one text attributes a variety of visual phenomena, the kinds of things that form the essence of his films, to the latter: "the fixed instants of constantly changing shapes are the pictures they take of themselves…and the halos of halos are the halos of angels" (*EB*, 138, 140).

As noted earlier, Brakhage's use of contradictions is itself contradictory. Just as his use of light vibrates between appeals to the visible and the invisible, so his films' forms are self-referential even while they stretch toward immateriality and ineffability. But the use of contradictions by religious artists to express the ineffable has a long history. In a chapter entitled "Religious Thought Beyond the Limits of Imagination," the historian J. Huizinga described the writings of medieval mystics:

> The insufficiency of all modes of expression is gradually accepted. First the brilliant imagery of symbolism is abandoned, and the too concrete formulas of dogma are avoided. But still the contemplation of the absolute Being ever remains linked up with notions of extension and light. Next these notions change into their negative opposites—silence, the void, obscurity. And as these latter formless conceptions, too, in their turn, prove insufficient, a constant joining of each to its contrary is tried. Finally, nothing remains to express the idea of divinity but pure negation.[17]

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[17] J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, (NY: Doubleday, 1954), p. 221.

In these troubled times, how can abstract films with mystical airs have any social value? They can't—unless you subscribe to the belief that changing individual consciousness is one way to change the world. What Brakhage's films ultimately argue for is a kind of thinking that attempts to see beyond the oppositions they contain, not by resolving them into some new synthesis but by preserving them as contradictions while at the same time imagining a state beyond all dualities, beyond all specifics. They argue for a version of consciousness that is at once all-inclusive and self-doubting, that simultaneously acknowledges the pleasures of life and the inevitability of death, and in which the mind never reaches for the certitude of any resting-point, but is instead engaged in an eternal dance. Today, when the apex of American consumer fetishism, centered around a worship of objects, threatens to give way to global war in which all sides are dogmatically wedded to their own *idées fixes*, his work is arguably more urgently needed than ever.

P. ADAMS SITNEY

Tales of the Tribes

Introducing Andrei Tarkovsky to an audience at the 1983 Telluride Film Festival, Stan Brakhage declared:

> I personally think that the three greatest tasks for film in the 20th century are 1) To make the epic, that is, to tell the tales of the tribes of the world. 2) To keep it personal, because only in the eccentricities of our personal lives do we have any chance at the truth. 3) To do the dream work, that is to illuminate the borders of the unconscious.[1]

Although he praised Tarkovsky as "the greatest living narrative film maker" and the only one who "does all these three things equally in every film he makes," Brakhage seems to have been acclaiming Tarkovsky for independently replicating his own agenda, most obviously in the requirements for personal filmmaking and explorations of "the dream work." In the nearly twenty years since he made that introduction, Brakhage has accelerated his own version of affirming the "tales of the tribe": Anazazi Indians, Dante, Marlowe, Goethe, Novalis, Stephen Foster, D. H. Lawrence, Plato, Rilke, Mann, and Stein have been evoked in the titles and themes of various films.

An even more revelatory catachresis of the words "telling" and "tales"—implicitly acknowledged by Brakhage's use of quotation marks—appeared in a theoretical text of 1993:

> Some ur-consciousness also then must be inferred—each cell both shaper and carrier of every spark struck from and through it, affected by each impulse-backlash and in synaptical montage with

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[1] "Brakhage Pans Telluride Gold," *Rolling Stock* 6, 1983, p. 11.

> each previous and following impulse: the whole organism feeding its varieties-of-fire into this interplay between brain and eye, as finally each cell of the foetal body can be intuited to be "telling" its "story" interactive with every other cell's story throughout the developing body, over-ridden by some entirety of rhythming light (as every individual heart-cell is conjoined to the dominating beat of each heart-part's over-riding beat) in the conglomerate rhythm of the whole heat-light of any given organ...of which each cell is a radical part compromised by every other cell's variable interaction, all contributory to the organic "tales" of these cells in concert.[2]

Through an ironic loop in the history of avant-garde film theory, here Brakhage offers, in 1993, a physiological phantasmagoria in justification of what Hollis Frampton once facetiously called "Brakhage's Theorem" (1972)—that all films are narrative. More narrowly conceived, the Biblical and Classical tales of the tribes have been elliptically retold in Brakhage's films, off and on, since the 1950s: Oedipus (*The Way to Shadow Garden* [1954]), The Descent to the Underworld (*The Dead* [1960], *Dante's Styx* [1975]) The Sinai theophany (*Blue Moses* [1962]), Apocalypse (*Oh Life, a Woe Story, The A Test News* [1963]), Genesis (*Creation* [1979]), The Fall (*The Machine of Eden* [1970], *The Animals of Eden and After* [1970]), The Vision of Isaiah (*The Peaceable Kingdom* [1971]), The Afterlife and Orpheus (*The Dante Quartet* [1987]), and Plato's Allegory of the Cave (*Visions in Meditation #3*) [1987]).

In *Creation* (1979) he recorded a visit to Alaskan glaciers during the period he was completing the *Sincerity/Duplicity* series. The proximate inspiration for the sublime vision of a world of massive ice and scarred rock was the art of the nineteenth-century American landscape painter, Frederic Edwin Church, whose works Brakhage had studied for more than a decade. Behind Church's paintings of icebergs lay a rich pictorial and literary tradition highlighted by Caspar David Friedrich's Artic scenes and the Antarctic fantasy of Poe, in his conclusion to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym.*

David Huntington called upon Church's writings to supply the spiritual context for his art:

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[2] "Time...on dit," *Musicworks* 55, Spring 1993, p. 56.

> The artist, we read in *The Crayon* in 1857, should restore things "to what they were at Creation." Or, on another page of the same journal, he should paint "the image of the World redeemed."...The American created a natural God. Church used the method of a Raphael or a Poussin to invent the perfect Creation.... To borrow a line of Emerson's quoted in praise of ["The Heart of the Andes"], it was "a fairer creation than we know."[3]

The conclusion of Brakhage's film seeks some of the restorative energy Huntington associates with Church. Gerald Carr's paraphrase of the kind of allegorical interpretation of the 1861 masterpiece "The Icebergs" Church and his contemporaries encouraged could almost describe *Creation*:

> Under the genial influences of late afternoon light and summer winds and currents, a marvel of nature's poetry unfolds before our eyes.... What had in "dull atmosphere" been "dead white,—ghastly and spiritless" (Church's own words) the sun kindles with evanescent hues and tints, the most limpid, tender and pure. Angles of crag and scarp flash and sparkle. Surfaces of satin and velvet "flicker and fade." Transfigured, the elements "glow and quiver." Born of the realm of eternal winter, "a miracle of beauty" proclaims "the moving presence of the Lord." In this moment of transcendence spirit and matter are regenerated as one. For the spectator of 1861, "The Icebergs" was a promise of Nature's and Man's immortality.[4]

However, in 1979 Brakhage would probably have treated with irony the Judeo-Christian theology underpinning this passage: for him the natural phenomenon is primary; the Judeo-Christian God is a trope to domesticate and ventriloquise the natural sublime.[5] So, the phrasing of imagery in *Creation* mimics a skewed version of the opening chapter of Genesis, from which he derives his title. Sweeping over a surface of dramatic lights and darks like the divine wind, the camera shortly discovers water. A few minutes later in a brilliant and dramatic coup, Brakhage suggests the division of the waters into upper and lower, heaven and earth, by flipping the filmstrip over, so that icebergs seems to hang down from a fluid sky. Thus by boldly reversing top and bottom, as well as forward and back motion, Brakhage presents the gorgeous illusions of icebergs flowing backwards in the sky as indeed illusionary. As in *Blue Moses* (1962) and in the Biblical allusions in *Metaphors on Vision*, he draws attention to the trope—above for below, forward for backward—in order to qualify its representational force and in so doing evacuates the religious and moral intimidation driving the sublime invention of the Priestly cosmologist of Genesis.

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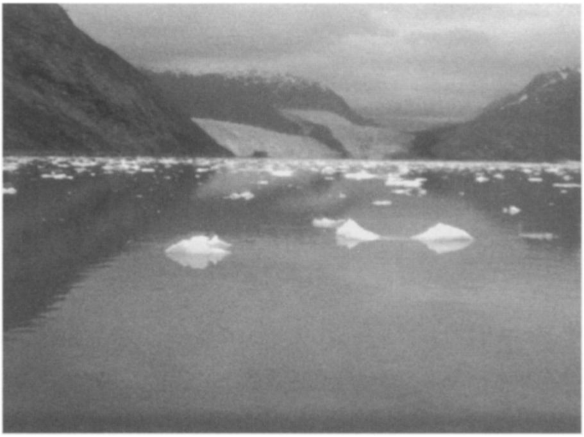
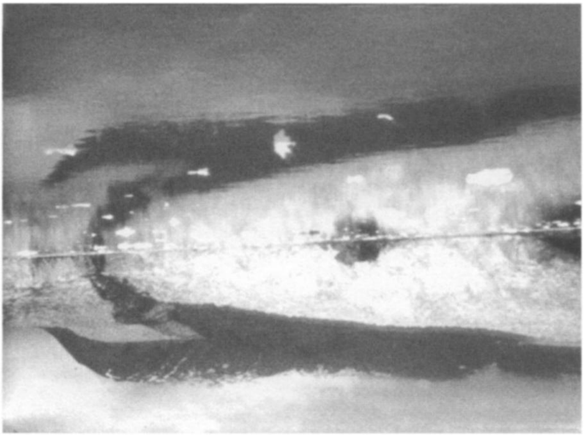
[3] David C. Huntington, *The Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church* (NY: George Braziller, 1966), pp. 51-52.

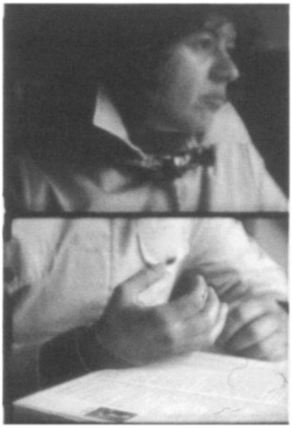
[4] Gerald L. Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: The Icebergs* (Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1980), p. 18.

[5] Brakhage's public statement on his belief in God (*Musicworks* 63, Fall 1995 [reprinted above—Ed.]) and his subsequent claim that he has always been a Christian do not alter the fact that he has been a penetrating critic of the rhetoric of religious revelation in *Metaphors on Vision, Dog Star Man, Blue Moses, The Animals of Eden and After, Creation,* and *Christ Mass Sex Dance.*





But in the balance between the filmmaker as a skeptic and critic of referential authority and the filmmaker as the celebrant of new-found vision and inventive vitality, Brakhage comes down strongly on the visionary side. As early as 1960, in a scenario quoted in *Metaphors on Vision*, he had remarked Novalis's visionary postulation of a heavenly river: "'Where is the stream?' cried he, with tears, 'Seest thou not its blue waves above us?' He looked up, and lo! the blue stream was flowing gently over their heads." In that early grant proposal, for the idealized "dailiness film," he promised to reconcile Novalis's "mystic" vision with Eddington's description of the dynamism of atomic physics; it was to be made "taking no image for granted," so that the filmmaker could set forth his cyclic theory of nature and imagination: "A walk with our child can transform forests into the fairylands which they originally inspired."[6] Here each creative act is a recovery of an earlier, original, trope. Thus the opening narrative of Genesis would be a reorganization of a number of spontaneous perceptual figurations, primal myths of nature, powerfully rearrayed in a dramatic sequence to persuade the audience that the narrator is aligned with an awesome power. As he retells the tales of the tribes of the world, Brakhage would expose the religious rhetoric and recover the original inspiration behind it. In that sense his somewhat playful repetition of Genesis is his own "creation."



The organization of material in *Creation* unmistakably follows the basic Biblical scenario, although even before the division of the waters, Brakhage introduces images of vegetation, as masses of fog rise from pine covered mountains. The rhythmic intercutting of forward and flipped movement through the glaciers incorporates shifts of lighting suggestive of day and night. Later the water is alive with living creatures—seals—and only then do birds fly under the vault of heaven. But subsequently the most startling shots in the film appear: two glimpses of Jane Brakhage—her face, then her hands, perhaps the only stilled images in the whole film. A little later, a man, perhaps a fisherman, briefly appears, the only other human in *Creation*, as if the formula were "female and male created He them."

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[6] Both quotations are from "State Meant" within "(Scenario submitted to and rejected by a foundation for grants to artists, 1960)," *Metaphors on Vision*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (*Film Culture* 30, 1963), unnumbered pages.

Formally and psychologically, the two shots of Jane are not integrated into the rhythmic fabric of the film; they bring us up short by surprise; for the intentional structure of the camera movements and the boat's movement had tacitly implied that the filmmaker was alone, in contrast to films his precursors shot from boats; from the beginning of Marie Menken's *Excursion* (1968) on the Circle Line around Manhattan stressed that she was amid a jostling crowd, the heirs of Whitman's ferryboat passengers. And the gliding camera of *Ai-Ye* (1948) posits Ian Hugo guided and navigated by natives through the Mexican swamps. But in *Creation,* Brakhage pretends to be so utterly alone in the Alaskan bay that his persona imperceptibly emerges from an embodiment of the divine wind itself. Wordsworth famously startles his readers when he discloses after 115 lines of "Tintern Abbey" that his sister, Dorothy, has been with him the whole time. Nothing could have been further from Brakhage's mind when he edited *Creation* than Wordsworth's abrupt shift from the egotistical sublime to the tutelage of Dorothy's "flashing eyes." Nevertheless, his film reenacts Wordsworth's uneasy shift from solitude to companionship.

To comprehend the moment Jane enters *Creation* we must consider just what Brakhage did to make the film. Obviously he visited Alaska with his wife; they took a boat ride as tourists, probably with other tourists framed out of the film. Brakhage was at great pains to eliminate almost all traces of other people or signs of civilization in filming the landscape, which probably reminded him of Church's Labrador. The two shots of Jane could have been taken anywhere, perhaps even indoors. In fashioning the material he brought back to his editing room, the filmmaker gave precedence to the smooth movement through water that the shots from the boat gave him; he supercharged some of these shots with visionary power and wit by running the film upside-down and backwards. He fleshed out this firm skeleton by a slow transformation of the landscape: the starkest images appear early, the vegetation and shafts of sunlight near the end.

Sometime in this formative process, perhaps from the start, he may have realized that he could order the seventeen-and-a-half minute film with allusions to the Priestly narrative of creation that opens Genesis, ending in a suggestion of the Jahwist's Eden that occurs in the second chapter. Thereby Jane enters the film: as the first human figure, the Female, wife, friend or dedicatee, but not touching the being of the fictive isolato behind the moving camera, and not as the Eve-like presence she had been in his earlier films.

There is a theoretical and historical dimension, as well as a practical one, to this kind of self-representation. For Emerson, "The American Scholar" is the American artist: "The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that which men in crowded cities find true of them also.... The better part of any man feels, This is my music; this is myself."[7] The invention of solitude is a crux for Brakhage's cinema. In 1963 he concluded the introduction to *Metaphors on Vision*, an interview, with a variant on Emerson's conjunction of solitude and universality that swerves into a connubial mystical union:

> I would say I grew very quickly as an artist once I got rid of drama as prime source of inspiration. I began to feel that all history, all life, all that I would have as material with which to work, would have to come from the inside of me out rather than as some form imposed from the outside in. I had the concept of everything radiating out of me, and that the more personal or egocentric I would become, the deeper I would reach and the more I would touch those universal concerns which involve all man. What seems to have happened since marriage is that I no longer sense ego as the greatest source for what can touch on the universal. I now feel that there is some concrete center where love from one person to another meets; and that the more total view arises from there.... Where I take action strongest and most immediately is in reaching through the power of all that love toward my wife, (and she toward me) and somewhere where those actions meet and cross, and bring forth children and films and inspire concerns with plants and rocks and all sights seen, a new center, composed of action, is made.[8]

[7] "The American Scholar" in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Zinn (NY: Penguin, 1982), p. 97.

[8] "Introduction," *Metaphors on Vision.*

In nuce this testament even prophesies the outline of the first three parts of *Sincerity* (1973-78): the egocentric election as a filmmaker, the connubial dialogue as geographical movement, and the finding and founding of a new center. However, the Emersonian election is radically self-reliant; in the eponymous essay he tropes the severe demands of Elijah and Jesus: "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me" (179). When Brakhage follows suit it is with intense resistance and in pain, in large part because he so fiercely willed "by Brakhage" to mean "'by way of Stan and Jane and the children Brakhage' because all the discoveries which used to pass only thru the instrument of myself are coming to pass thru the sensibilities of those I love."[9] So to acknowledge his creative solitude was to confess "Duplicities"; it may even be to recognize in the alternation of "sincerities" and "duplicities" the systaltic rhythm that founds "the music of myself," and motivates the assembling of ever larger and more complex series of films.

Throughout the 1970s Brakhage periodically sought solitude to find "the music of myself" in the landscapes of high Romanticism: the enchanted forest of *The Wold Shadow* (1972), fields of luminosity revealed in intense absorption with the glass ashtray of *The Text of Light* (1974), or the stark wilderness of *Desert* (1976). But in *Creation* the brief images of Jane break the illusion of solitude without pushing the film toward the exploration of being-with-others that voyeuristically drives the Pittsburgh triad of 1971 (*eyes* with the police, *deus ex* with a surgical team in an operating room, and *The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes* with a coroner performing an autopsy) or the explicitly scopophilic *Sexual Meditations* of 1970-1972.

The shots of Jane in *Creation* are so still, and separated from the Alaskan environs, that they check the dilation set in motion by the frission of isolation in the landscape, and heightened by the camera motion and rhythmic editing, before it is even clear that another order of disturbance is embedded in the composition of the two shots: Jane is absorbed by something unseen offscreen; for an instant Brakhage shows us her hands, still in her lap, the left hand curled and empty. This is unique among the hundreds of portraits he filmed of his first wife. Repeatedly he had shown her either addressing the camera with love, anger, or embarrassment, or engaged with her children or animals, or silently absorbed (but with the object of her concentration represented in the frame or through editing). Of course we may conclude that the passing landscape enthralls Jane too in these brief shots, but the film refuses to make that explicit and in that reticence underscores her separation from the filmmaker.

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[9] Title page, *Metaphors on Vision.*

The disturbance of the genre—of the solitary artist overwhelmed by awesome nature—may be the point, or part of the point of *Creation.* It reflects the crisis of *Sincerity IV* and *V* (1980) in a sublime rhetoric; that is to say, the film sublimates the failure or the decay of the "new center, composed of action" heralded sixteen years earlier. Like his model, Frederic Church, who painted his Edenic visions of Jamaica immediately following the tragic loss of two of his children to diphtheria, Brakhage achieves an optimistic resolution to his examination of the bleak arctic bay in the last five minutes of the film by contrasting the surging waters and the flinty scrags with a vision of verdant northern woodlands and sunlight piercing vaults of leaves. In this personal and dreamlike retelling of a "tale of the tribes of the world" he enacts a spiritual renovation through a homage to one of his artistic heros in a crisis-film that surprisingly parallels the evolving form of his visual autobiography, the *Sincerity* films.

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The crisis deepened; the marriage ended. Through the last six years of that crisis Brakhage painted and edited off and on the four-part, eight-minute film that would become *The Dante Quartet* in 1987. If *Creation* brought the filmmaker's meditations on Genesis and Frederic Church together, *The Dante Quartet* drew upon his readings of the *Commedia*, Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Rilke's *Sonnets* *to Orpheus*, and Parker Tyler's *The Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelitchew*, as well as Robert Rauschenburg's illustrations to the *Inferno*. He would have seen *A Modern Inferno*, the six-page series of collage drawings Rauschenberg did for *Life* (December 17,1965) before he had access to John Chamberlain's copy of the limited edition of the thirty-four illustrations, one for each canto, the artist had made between 1959 and 1960. The fusion of transfer photographs, watercolor, gouache, and pencil that Rauschenberg first used in this series bore superficial resemblances to the mixed techniques of painting, staining, and scratching over previously photographed images Brakhage had employed independently in *Prelude: Dog Star Man* (1961) and *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961). The study of Rauschenberg's drawings encouraged his elaboration of the technique in *The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth* (1968) and in subsequent films partially or wholly handpainted.

Brakhage's "Dante" is a poet of visionary and visual discriminations, rather than the social prophet of cosmic justice and redemption, and his homage to him is a series of handpainted films inspired by hypnogogic vision. By making a "quartet" of the three cantiche of the *Commedia*, from the start he dramatically rejects the triadic, Trinitarian, infrastructure of the epic in *terza rima*. Tyler's 1967 biography of the painter Pavel Tchelitchew, actually an allegory of artistic life, had tutored the filmmaker to read Dante's poem as a ritual of terrestrial life, while triggering an obsessive worry that no modern artist can complete a *Paradiso*; for he compared Tyler's discussion of his subject's death before he could finish the third of his major paintings with Ezra Pound's fragmentary final *Cantos*.

In an extensive interview Brakhage gave on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday he described the structure of *The Dante Quartet*:

> The four parts are *Hell Itself*, *Hell Spit Flexion*, *Purgation*, and *existence is song*, and they appear in that order... I made *Hell Itself* during the breakup with Jane and the collapse of my whole life, so I got to know quite well the streaming of the hypnogogic process that's hellish. Now the body can not only feed back its sense of being in hell but also its getting out of hell, and *Hell Spit Flexion* shows the way out—it's there as a crowbar to lift one out of hell toward the

> transformatory state—purgatory. And finally there's a fourth state that's fleeting. I've called this last part *existence is song* quoting Rilke, because I don't want to presume upon the after-life and call it "Heaven". So what I tried to do in the quartet was to bring down to earth Dante's vision, inspired by what's on either side of one's nose and right before the eyes: a movie that reflects the nervous system's basic sense of being.[10]

Painting the first and fourth parts on the broad expanse of IMAX film stock, *Hell Spit Flexion* in 35mm, and *Purgation* over bits of a 70mm CinemaScope print of Billy Wilder's *Irma la Douce*, Brakhage fueled his painstaking labor with fantasies of seeing his Dante series projected on an immense screen—the type used at the National Air and Space Museum or at World Trade Expositions. The minimal iconography befits the monumental scale of this conception: broad swirls of color, latticeworks of cracked paint; holes and crevices of white light bore through a throbbing wall of blended hues. Only *Hell Itself* lacks photographic imagery. The optical printing, holding some frames as long as half a second, retards its thick churning motion, then spasmodically accelerates and decelerates it, in three unequally long phrases. It has a creamy white base which engulfs and slowly seems to push across the screen the red-orange-yellow blends and the pure blues and blacks that enter it (see plates 17 and 18).

Hell Spit Flexion (separately released in 1983) sits framed in the center of the screen, as film within a film. At first a whirl of camera-generated images prevail—blurs, a pure blue frame as if of the sky, the disc of a solar corona—before a thick layering of ochreous paint shimmering on a black base takes precedence.

Brakhage's note reveals the source of its rasping rhythm, as if coughing up a phlegm of cosmic fragments:

> My moving-visual response to William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," this hand-painted film seems the most rhythmically exact of all my work: it was inspired by memories of an old man coughing in the night of a thin-walled ancient hotel.(*CCC*)

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[10] Suranjan Ganguly, "Stan Brakhage—The 60th Birthday Interview," *Film Culture* 78 (Summer 1994), p. 26.

Reading Blake's repudiation of religious orthodoxy, and the elevation of poetry as prophecy, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Brakhage would have encountered a powerful formulation of the position implicit in his use of scripture from *Blue Moses* and *Metaphors on Vision* in the early 1960s through *Creation* in 1979:

> The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with gods or Geniuses....
>
> Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract mental deities from their Objects; thus began Priesthood.
>
> Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.
>
> ....
>
> Have now another plain fact: Any man of mechanical talents may from the writings of Paracelsus or Jacob Behmen, produce ten thousand volumes of equal value with Swedenborg's. and from those of Dante or Shakespear, an infinite number.[11]

Inserting the autonomous *Hell Spit Flexion* into the triad may be Brakhage's indirect way of saying he cannot retrace Dante's theological pilgrimage without subscribing to Blake's dialectical identity of the poles. The fiery volcano is not a signpost in Hell; the movement from pure paint to complex fusions of paint and photography is not a valuation or a progression, as Brakhage's concentration on handpainted films in the 1990s witnesses.

A less flamboyant articulation of the superiority of revelation through poetry to religious dogma could be found in Emerson himself. Consider this skimming of points from "The Over-Soul":

> When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come.... From within or from behind, a light shines through upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all.... Men ask concerning the

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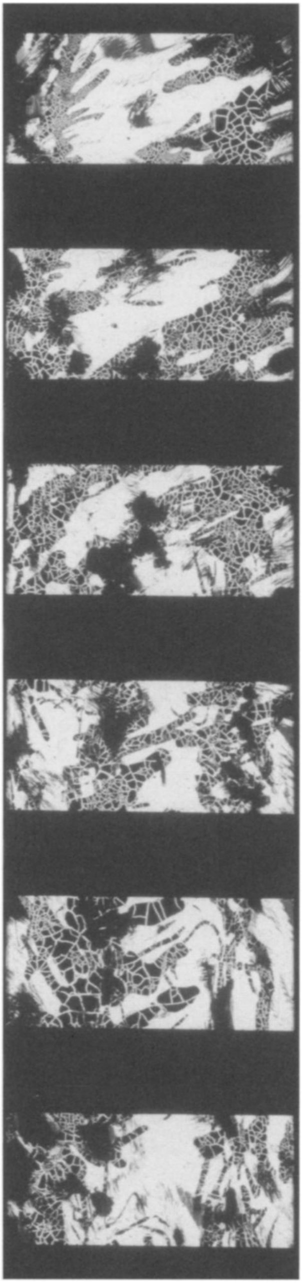
[11] David V. Erdman, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (NY: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 37, 42.

> immortality of the soul, the employments of heaven, the state of the sinner, and so forth. They even dream that Jesus has left replies to precisely these interrogatories. Never a moment did that sublime figure speak in their patois.... The moment the doctrine of the immortality is separately taught, man is already fallen.... By the same fire, vital, consecrating, celestial, which burns until it shall dissolve all things into the waves and surges of an ocean of light, we see and know each other, and what spirit each is of.... There is in all great poets a wisdom of humanity which is superior to any talents they exercise.... The reliance upon authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the soul.(206, 208, 216-17, 219, 223)



Ever insidious, Emerson's writing so possesses our national aesthetic sensibility that it frequently goes unnoted and unacknowledged. The alienated strangeness of Blake's ironic vision seems to have attracted Brakhage's attention. Similar concepts as articulated in "The Over-Soul" are so familiar, so thoroughly incorporated in the American artistic psyche that they evade notice despite the closeness of Emerson's metaphors—fire and oceans of light—to Brakhage's practice.

The base of *Purgation* is clear leader, so that the pure white light of the projector radiates though the gaps, holes, and cracks in the veils of paint and—more dimly—filmed images. All the paint, dominantly red with a strong presence of blue, is mixed with black, heightening the intensity of the white light. The longest section has nearly twenty fades to blackness articulating its many transitions. It consistently points to and at the same time obscures a nearly eradicated liminal imagery behind the skein of paint and stellar suggestions of white light Brakhage put over the vestiges of *Irma la Douce.* Perhaps the underlying shots are of a Parisian studio seen from outside; for a window or door frame can be discerned. Later a man in sunglasses appears, either looking through a window or as a framed photograph. All that seems to matter is the suggestion of a passageway for light and perhaps movement, and a figure whose gaze cannot (yet) bear the light or transit the frame. Giving new meaning—by painting over and scratching marks for light to break through the Hollywood image—is Brakhage's act of purgation, working through the suspended time between the trauma of his divorce and a renewal.

Parker Tyler, reading deeply into Tchelitchew's painting "Hide and Seek," interpreted Purgatory as the experience of childhood: "Purgatory is the very realm of anticipation. And so is childhood.... [It] can be nothing but expectation; whatever its suffering it is illuminated with hope and a strong feeling for the future; as involved with a sense of Fate and Fortune, further, it is combinatory..."[12] Brakhage does not follow Tyler's association of Purgatory and childhood, as far as I can see, but "suffering...illuminated with hope and a strong feeling for the future...a sense of Fate and Fortune" could be a gloss on the segment, pointing toward the recessive thresholds in deep space that seem to draw us through the painted atmosphere, an anticipation of the light, to reverse playfully Brakhage's early title.

Blue predominates in the palette of *existence is song,* the climax and most eloquent part of the quartet. The almost obscured opening image might have descended from Ian Hugo's *Bells of Atlantis* (1952). One gets a fleeting impression of underwater coral, blue on blue, before the darkened paint, a mixture of blues and reds, fuses that image with an even more fleeting suggestion of the craterous surface of the moon (see plates 14 and 15). The ensuing phrase, a wrestling match of blue and red (see plate 16), culminates in a quick, gorgeous series of red volcanic eruptions behind the wall of paint. In the final imageless minute of the film there is more blue paint than anywhere previously. So we can conclude that Brakhage follows the symbolical association, favored by medieval and renaissance painters, of blue as the heavenly color, even if he might prefer to argue that the findings of his neuro-optical apperception can tell us something about the origins of that symbolism.

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[12] *The Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelitchew* (NY: Fleet, 1967), pp. 119-120.

Brakhage's earlier efforts at handpainting on film had been tied to his study of closed-eye vision (as in *Dog Star Man* or *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular*). But the self-scrutiny of his visual imagination during the 1970s brought with it the more comprehensive formulation of "moving visual thinking," an idea which, according to Bruce Elder,

> is fabulously elusive; it seems, however, to have to do with a transitional form of awareness that exists only fleetingly, and mostly without our being consciously aware of its contents. These are in any case indefinite and without rigid boundaries, for they are the forms of incipient percepts before the mind has labeled them as belonging to a certain type, and has filled out the details of their shapes.... Brakhage described 'moving visual thinking' as a form of awareness close to the actual excitement of the nervous system....awareness before it develops into visual forms of focused attention.[13]

The handpainted films which gradually came to dominate his oeuvre in the 1990s are forays into visual ontology, prepared by the "imagnostic" *Roman Numeral* and *Arabic* series (1979-1981). Thus, the trilogy *I Take These Truths*, *We Hold These*, and *I...* (all from 1995) are efforts to invoke respectively a visual field of "self evident" *a priori* truths, a commonality of abstract vision, and the optical signature peculiar to the filmmaker.

§

During the formative years of Brakhage's career, probably unknown to him, Anton Ehrenzweig formulated a theory of creativity that runs parallel to his own ideas. *The Psycho-analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* (1953) argued the importance of non-focused vision for painters and saw the work of Cezanne and his successors in modern and abstract art as representing that vision. Ehrenzweig elaborated on Freud's interpretations of jokes and dreams in his effort to enlarge the theories of artistic perception he derived from gestalt psychologists. In *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967) he turned to the psychoanalytic concept of "primary process," the oceanic undifferentiated structure of the unconscious in which multiple perspectives and contradictory values coexist timelessly, for theoretical support of the aesthetics of unfocused vision of what he then called "dedifferention." For him the creative process operates on an alternating rhythm of incorporation and projection which corresponds to oral and anal phases of infantile development.

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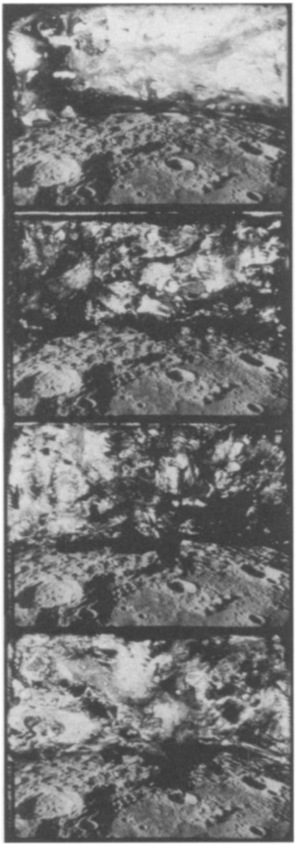
[13] Bruce Elder, "On Brakhage," in *Stan Brakhage: A Retrospective 1977-1995* (NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), unnumbered pages.



The affinities between Brakhage's interpretation of his own work and Ehrenzweig's analysis of art grow more evident in light of the filmmaker's description of the *Roman Numeral* series as films "which explore...that pre-language, pre-'picture' realm of the mind which provides the physical *grounds* for image making (imagination)" and the *Arabics* as "formed by the intrinsic grammar of the most inner (perhaps pre-natal) structure of thought itself." The dynamics of eye scanning and peripheral vision—foci of Ehrenzweig's initial investigations—had been central to Brakhage's art since the mid-1950s, but with the imagnostic films he centered his attention on the arena of "dedifferentiated" oceanic vision, the subliminal perception of a ground that absorbs all figures which Ehrenzweig postulated was the foundation of all phantasies. Painting on film subsequently provided Brakhage with a means to recontact both the oral and anal "levels" of that phantasy formation. In *The Dante Quartet* brief glimpses of an erupting volcano and craters of the moon, seen amid or under the swirls of paint, could be seen as what Ehrenzweig called "poemagogic images":

> I have coined the term "poemagogic" to describe [the] special function of inducing and describing the ego's creativity.... Poemagogic

> images, in their enormous variety, reflect the various phases of creativity in a very direct manner, though the central theme of death and rebirth, of trapping and liberations, seems to overshadow the others.[14]

At the climax of Brakhage's quartet, such images mark an exchange between anal and oral expression (to use Ehrenzweig's dichotomy). The note to *Hell Spit Flexion*, invoking a primal scene of expectoration, confirms by (free) association the fantasy complex driving the film: the "old man coughing in the night" displaces the mythic idea of Cronus swallowing and regurgitating his divine children; he is confined to Tartarus with Typhon whose fury produces volcanoes. In his later handpainted films, the "poemagogic" images, allegorical of the psychodynamics of creativity, tend to disappear, but nevertheless he vividly reasserted the antithetical juxtaposition of oral pleasure and anal anxiety in the title *Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse* (1991).

The "story" of *The Dante Quartet*, as we glean it from Brakhage's catalogue notes and interview statements, is that there is a way out spasmic magma of hellish proprioception: an optical reflex, like the rhythmic expectoration of phlegm, transits through a liminal stage of purgation into the realm of song, where the psychic and somatic narrative is sublimated in Orphic and Promethean myths: the earth sings in perpetual, volcanic self-creation. Frederic Church once again was among Brakhage's Virgilian guides in this revelation of tellurian ecstasy when he painted the volcanic landscape of "Cotopaxi" in 1863.

Brakhage takes the title of his "Paradiso" from Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*: "existence is song." The ontological force of the revelation is more evident in the German: "Gesang ist Dasein." Brakhage would have noted, of course, that Rilke wrote all twenty-six Orphic sonnets of the first book in an inspired trance lasting three days; for he has often spoken of the trance of motor-dictation that drives his filmmaking and of the necessity of his obedience to a Muse. When Rilke writes "Gesang ist Dasein," he reveals the identity of Being and poetry at the core of his trance: he must make his songs in order to exist; and the subject of his songs is that Being sings. Brakhage has identified the term "song" as one crucial to his sense of his own work. He elaborated on it to Suranjan Ganguly:

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[14] Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*(Berkeley: U of California P, 1971), pp. 176-77.

> Gangulay: Looking back over 40 years of filmmaking, what matters most now?
>
> Brakhage: That I believe in song. That's what I wanted to do and I did it quite selfishly, out of my own need to come through to a voice that is comparable with song and related to all animal life on earth. I believe in the beauty of the singing of the whale; I am moved deeply at the whole range of song that the wolf makes when the moon appears, or neighborhood dogs make—that they make their song, and this is the wonder of life on earth, and I in great humility wish to join this.[15]

Rilke's artificial, mythologized evocation of the Orpheus and Greek divinities may be more comformable for Brakhage than Dante's conviction of the Trinity. In the stanza from which he takes his title for the segment, the addressee is ambiguous: perhaps Apollo or the recently deceased, young dancer to whom the sonnets are dedicated:

> Song, as you teach it, is not desire,
> not suing for something yet in the end attained;
> song is existence. Easy for the god.
> But when do we exist? and when does he
> spend the earth and stars upon our being?[16]

Dante's quest for Beatrice and Orpheus's descent to Eurydice may well have suggested to the filmmaker at this time his loss of his wife (through divorce, not death). Turning to the poets while painstakingly painting film frames for several years during this crisis, Brakhage refound what he had discovered in *23rd Psalm Branch*: the meaning of "song." In the 1966 film he had photographed the pages of Louis Zukofsky's *A:11* beginning "Song, my song, raise grief to music" as the motto for transforming into art his compound agony over the Vietnam War and over the mass protests against it.

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[15] "All That Is Light: Brakhage at 60," *Sight and Sound*, 40, p. 23.

[16] *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton (NY: Norton, 1942), p. 21 (part 1, no. 3).

Emerson, mourning the death of his young son, wrote in "Experience" of surviving loss:

> But the longest love or aversion has a speedy term. The great and crescive self, rooted in absolute nature, supplants all relative existence and ruins the kingdom of mortal friendship and love. Marriage (in what is called the spiritual world) is impossible, because of the inequality between every subject and every object.... All I know is reception; I am and I have: but I do not get, and when I have fancied that I had gotten anything, I found I did not. I worship with wonder the great Fortune.(305, 309)

As Brakhage once implied of Zukofsky's poetry, he now indicates, quoting Rilke, what Emerson affirmed in response to all genuine poetry: "This is my music; this is myself." In *The Dante Quartet* Brakhage puts the handpainted film on a new basis: the colored rhythms become the ground of Being, the matrix for condensing his intimations of prenatal and post-mortem vision and for making a place for cinema within the music of thanatotopic poetics.

JOHN PRUITT

Stan Brakhage and the Long Reach of Maya Deren's Poetics of Film

> How you produce volume after volume the way you do is more than I can conceive, but you haven't to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts as I do. It is like walking through the densest brushwood.
>
> —William James to Henry James,
> letter dated March 10, 1887

> The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have.
>
> —Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (1951)

> All writers who eschew story *altogether* are essentially aspiring to the philosophical
>
> —Stan Brakhage,
> "Gertrude Stein: Meditative Literature and Film" (1991)

From a range of possible filmmakers, Maya Deren is worth considering as Brakhage's most important immediate predecessor. This is not because her films are necessarily any more significant than those of Kenneth Anger, Sidney Peterson, James Broughton, Marie Menken, or any other figures who may come to mind, but because, unlike them (and like Brakhage), she also produced in writing a significant theoretical position towards cinematic art, perhaps best encapsulated in two works, the chapbook, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film* (1946), and the essay, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality" (1960). Both works present a compatible point of view and both contain a trenchant, highly polemical critique of two poles of cinematic art, the documentary on the one hand and the animated, abstract film on the other. In Deren's conception, the standard documentary, in its slavish respect for a false objectivity by way of photographic transparency, is too imaginatively feeble to think and respond to the very subject matter it purports to encounter. Deren asserts that documentary needs a greater range of formal options, options which may compromise (correctly) the invisible presence of the filmmaker in order to respond to reality. The problem with the animated, abstract film is the reverse: although such works may be aesthetically powerful, they are animated paintings and not films *per se*, because the photographic reality of the world itself has been bypassed altogether. They make use of the filmstrip but should be categorized elsewhere because they have the aesthetic principles of another medium. In Deren's powerfully reductive scheme, the unique privilege of film lies precisely in its ability to present a series of images which depicts an argument and interplay between the imaginative and the real:

> Nothing can be achieved in the art of film until its form is understood to be the product of a completely unique complex: the exercise of an instrument which can function, simultaneously, both in terms of discovery and invention.[1]

This dialectical complex, in turn, provides the emotional tension which propels any given work. To lean too heavily to one side or the other of this polarity is to take an easy way out and risk aesthetic impoverishment. Rather, the contradictory nature of cinema should be wholly embraced. Out of greater difficulty comes a potential for greater reward:

> This very profusion of potentialities seems to create confusion in the minds of most film-makers, a confusion which is diminished by eliminating a major portion of those potentialities in favor of one or two, upon which the film is subsequently structured. An

[1] Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film* (Yonkers: The Alicat Bookshop Press, 1946), p. 46. Reprinted as an appendix to Bill Nichols, ed., *Maya Deren and the American Avant Garde* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002).

> artist, however, should not seek security in a tidy mastery over the simplifications of deliberate poverty; he should instead have the creative courage to face the danger of being overwhelmed by fecundity in the effort to resolve it into simplicity and economy.[2]

Now the objections to Deren are rather obvious. For one thing, her thinking almost gets her into the contradictory position of considering a conventional photographic image more real than reality itself:

> The most immediate distinction of film is the capacity of the camera to represent a given reality in its own terms to the extent that it is accepted as a substitute proper for that reality. A photograph will serve as proof of the "truth" of some phenomenon where either a painting or a verbal testimony would fail to carry weight. (*An Anagram*, 30.)

For another thing, it would be employing a Procrustean bed indeed if one refused to see Harry Smith, Peter Kubelka, Robert Breer, Larry Jordan, et al., as filmmakers of great consequence, despite the fact that all of them could be considered animators and/or creators of radically abstract works. But Deren's polemic is not so easily dismissed. It may be true that as soon as one begins to think at all about photography, one moves beyond the naïve point of view of the lover of snapshots who confuses the reality of an event with his cherished photographic record of it. But an aura of reality still lingers around our most sophisticated response to a photographic image. To photograph Arapahoe Peak (as Brakhage did for *Song 27*) we have to reside in or travel to Colorado. We can write a poem about it or paint it from memory. There *is* a strong aspect of photography which attests to a state of being-in-the-world, and Deren is one among many theorists who have raised this issue.

To take a different tack, observe the career trajectory of the above list of abstract film artists. All of them brought their work to a point of radical abstraction or absolute formal control and then felt a kind of pull "back" to photographic or representational imagery. In at least two cases this move resulted (arguably) in an enrichment of their work. I am thinking of Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise* (1966), made after *Arnulf Rainer* (1960); or Breer's *Fuji* (1973), made after *70* (1971). In the wake of "a tidy mastery," there was perhaps nowhere else to go, and one wouldn't want to call such a move "regressive." Deren's point of view has value not so much for its orthodox strictures (there will always be documentaries, there will always be animated films) but rather because she cogently and persuasively mapped out for avant-garde practitioners in the postwar era a manner of filmmaking in which the representational means themselves could become the basis of a highly complex intellectual drama. The implication of her viewpoint is that a meditative self-consciousness could not be achieved *on visual terms*, without maintaining the equilibrium of cinema's two-sided nature when it is conceived of as a photographic medium in the classic sense.

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[2] Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality." Reprinted in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Avant-garde Film* (NY: NYUP, 1978), p. 62. Deren's essay first appeared in *Daedalus*, Winter, 1960.

To see where Brakhage fits in here, one has to return to Sitney's historical observation in *Visionary Film*, in part based on Brakhage's own testimony, that by taking clues from the spontaneous, unconventional hand-held camerawork of Marie Menken, and the intrusive distortions of Sidney Peterson's anamorphic lens, Brakhage evolved his own immensely influential camera aesthetics of the "lyrical film," which were ultimately a rejection of Deren's insistence that filmmaking must begin with a respect for the conventional means of the photographic image. Thus, Deren's critique in 1960 of a tendency within the avant-garde could be read as a comment on precisely where Brakhage's poetics were taking it at that moment:

> In such cases the camera itself has been conceived of as the artist, with distorting lenses, multiple superimpositions, etc., used to simulate the creative action of the eye, the memory, etc. Such well-intentioned efforts to use the medium creatively, by forcibly inserting the creative act in the position it traditionally occupies in the visual arts, accomplish, instead, the destruction of the photographic image as reality. This image, with its unique ability to engage us simultaneously on several levels—by the objective authority of reality, by the knowledges and values which we attach to that reality, by the direct address of its aspect, and by a manipulated

> relationship between these—is the building block for the creative use of the medium. ("Cinematography," 68)

In *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), Brakhage explicitly stated his war on the very conventions of the purported objectivity of the camera lens which Deren defends, by listing a number of possible creative strategies to undermine "19th-century Western compositional perspective":

> By deliberately spitting on the lens or wrecking its focal intention, one can achieve the early stages of impressionism. One can make this prima donna heavy in performance of image movement by speeding up the motor, or one can break up movement, in a way that approaches a more direct inspiration of contemporary human eye perceptibility of movement, by slowing the motion while recording the image. One may hand hold the camera and inherit worlds of space. One may over- and under-expose the film... (*EB*, 15-6)

R. Bruce Elder, in an impressive and exhaustive study of the roots of Brakhage's aesthetics, follows his own citation of the same quote from Deren cited above with the following commentary, which, I think, places the two filmmakers in a form of opposition:

> Brakhage's adherence to the Romantic tradition involves a commitment to the idea that what happens on the "inside" is all of a piece with what occurs on "the outside"; furthermore, Brakhage's transformations of the image have the end of revealing the operations of the imagination. It is the effect that the concrete particular has on consciousness, or, more accurately, the role that consciousness plays in bringing the concrete particular into existence, that is the focus of Brakhage's interests.... Deren believed to the contrary that cinematography, as a photographically based medium, has a strong commitment to unmanipulated reality and that any distortion of reality through "optical" or photographic "tricks" is inconsistent with the nature of the medium; basically, she argues that the still or movie camera has a disposition towards "the outside"—towards, even, presenting "the outside" accurately.[3]

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[3] *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1998), p. 502. The quoted passage appears in a long footnote.

For my purposes, I would like to break down this opposition. For one thing, Deren's views, as one might expect in any theoretical position, ultimately contain contradictions. It is especially in *An Anagram*, where she shows a keen interest in scientific method, that she acknowledges the intrusive subjective mediation of even the most passive observation:

> Even in science—or rather, above all in science, the pivotal characteristic of man's method is a violation of natural integrity. He has dedicated himself to the effort to intervene upon it, to dissemble the ostensibly inviolate whole, to emancipate the element from the context in which it "naturally" occurs, and to manipulate it in the creation of a new contextual whole—a new, original state of matter and reality—which is specifically the product of his intervention.
>
> Once a natural integrity has been so violated, the selection of elements from the original context, all subsequent integrations are no longer natural or inevitable. The task of creating forms as dynamic as the relationships in natural phenomena, is the central problem of both the scientist and the artist. (*An Anagram*, 12)

It is that last sentence in particular which seems to contain something of *Metaphors on Vision* in embryonic form. Yet, one also has to acknowledge the inescapable and perhaps necessary divergence of theory from practice in an artist's work. A poetic film wholly consistent with its purported theoretical underpinnings, as brilliant and complex as they might be, would be dull indeed. The first shot of Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, while photographed in a classic, professional way (presumably via the aid of her then husband, Alexander Hammid, an already experienced filmmaker), shows a wholly "staged" image which immediately propels the film into the realm of the imagination: an artificial arm reaches down into the frame from directly overhead (i.e. seemingly with no body attached) to grab an artificial flower. Deren's "orthodox" photographic means are just that: a means towards a representational tension, arising from her insight that an intentionally realistic continuity of photographic images is perforce more dreamlike than reality, and any corresponding dreamlike sequence has more of reality in it than any dream.

And then there is Brakhage's side of the opposition. In a nutshell, one could view Brakhage's break with the so-called psychodrama, as developed by Deren in the mid-1940s, as consisting of two significant, though related gestures: (1) he took the camera off the tripod and gave it freedom of movement as it begins to explore the world with a wide variety of unorthodox means, like those cited above: out-of-focus shots, under and over-exposing, scratchings on the film surface, use of camera flares, colored leader, etc; and (2) at the same time, he dispensed with the pre-camera, stylized events staged before the camera (script and actors). Drama had been left behind. As in Sitney's compact, memorable formulation:

> The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision.[4]

From Deren's ostensible point of view, Brakhage's radical subjectivity had forced his filmmaking out of the domain of film altogether and into that of painting, specifically Abstract Expressionism, where the image's "umbilical cord" connection to exterior reality was broken, where an image of a given object, if an object makes an appearance at all, would merely be the image of the idea of that object. And the aggressive flow of rapidly changing images was not exterior drama but a stream of these same interior ideas, feelings, and memories as they emerged, developed, and perhaps dissolved only to give way to other ideas. It was almost as if Brakhage were literally writing with the camera, in pursuit of Charles Olson's famous dictum for projective verse, "...in any given poem always, always one perception must MOVE INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!"[5] In short, armed with the literary and painterly strategies of his contemporaries or near contemporaries, Brakhage was abandoning (in Deren's critical scheme) the cinematic. Thus, it is possible that Brakhage's intellectual and aesthetic sophistication inadvertently underscored a sense of a break with Deren, for his innovations were so extraordinary, one needed the aid

[4] P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film* (NY: Oxford UP, 1974), p. 180.

[5] "Projective Verse," in *Human Universe and Other Essays* (NY: Grove Press, 1967), p. 53.

of extra-cinematic sources, like Gertrude Stein, John Cage, and Ezra Pound to explain and defend them.

But one can defend Brakhage's innovations on cinematic grounds, too, perhaps most effectively with a position articulated by a one-time champion of the younger artist, Deren herself, whose memory in the forty years since her untimely death Brakhage has always respected, despite the admitted difficulties in their relationship to each other as artists. Rather than see an opposition or break, there is an advantage to the perspective that Brakhage was taking Deren's poetics of cinema in the direction they wanted to go but which for some reason or other she herself couldn't take them. I would even go so far as to say, counter to Brakhage's own comments, that this was in part done in the name of "drama" rather than eschewing it.

If one reduces Deren's theory to a view that cinema ideally should exploit a contradiction within its own apparatus—that between the passively photographic (in the name of realistic presence) and the imaginatively formalistic (editing, camera manipulation)—then Brakhage's "break" can be seen as a logical extension or intensification of both counterpoised tendencies; for, at the very moment he dispenses with pre-staged events and begins shooting on a daily basis without a script (using his immediate environment and growing family in a more direct engagement with the real), he also opens up the options available to him as a formalist. We could say that the intensity of Deren's dialectic is raised considerably by widening the gulf between its two antipodes. Brakhage's films are more subjective in approach just as their content is more documentary.

Which film is more "dramatic" then—*Meshes of the Afternoon* or *Anticipation of the Night*? Implying no criticism of Deren (Brakhage himself labels her films "cool"[6]), I would say that the dramatic energy of *Anticipation of the Night*, its relentless kinetic thrust of liberating "flight" coupled with a frustrated quest ending in failure, provides rather an unparalleled experience of antagonistic conflict. But the sort of conflict I am talking about is more akin to the observation (by Donald Francis Tovey, I believe) that critics were mistaken when they asserted that Beethoven had a too inadequate sense of drama to produce a successful stagework. Rather, the dramatic tension inherent in many of his symphonic movements was actually too high-pitched for the relatively ritualistic pace of an operatic setting.

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[6] *Film at Wit's End* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1989), p. 109.

Contrary to Brakhage's avowed quest for "an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic" (*EB*, 12), one wonders if that same compositional logic at times stands him in good stead when the dramatic purpose suits him—in a manner quite compatible with Deren's strategies. For example, there is the celebrated climax to the first part of *Dog Star Man*, in which the man (Brakhage) slips for the umpteenth time as he climbs the mountain, the forced ninety degree camera angle underscoring the intrusive presence of the camera in the relatively orthodox (at least for Brakhage) narrative shots. Then there is a cut to one of the "scientific" shots, a microscopic image of the start-stop action of blood in a capillary. In a piece of classic montage, the viewer instantly recognizes a metaphoric assertion—that the "two steps forward and one step backwards" struggle of the man up the mountain has a parallel physical reality within the discontinuous movement of the blood's circulatory system. Yet Brakhage holds the shot longer than it would take for the image to make its symbolic point, so that its texture as a document also takes hold and we as viewers marvel at the power of the camera to see into the landscape of the body's interior in all its detail. As the impact of the cut fades over time, the figurative sense of the image dissipates into the mere physical presence, as it were, of a single shot with no symbolic pretence. This impressive moment, almost one of epiphanic recognition on the part of a first-time viewer, feels very much like a classic dramatic finish. The film has given us time to intuit a metaphoric expression which develops the drama of the man's struggle up the mountain, while at the same time we get an insight into the method that allows us to make an imaginative connection across two, in point of fact, wholly unrelated shots. And we also see that same mental construct dissolve in the face of the powerful anti-metaphoric thrust of a photograph's rich detail. What does the camera know about metaphors and symbols, even when blessed with compositional logic? In Brakhage's visionary mode, he relies on his great innovative technique and architectonic brilliance, but he also must depend on the instrument of the camera itself, whose own mechanistic terms dictate (Deren's point) that every possible series of photographic images is simply in actuality, a feeble, metonymic catalogue of unrelated details "stolen" from the outside world.

Deren's view that photographic imagery is unavoidably linked to reality helps us gain insight, in part, into another significant expressive aspect of some of Brakhage's films—namely the emotional cost exacted on him as an artist for being present as a cinematographer when directly confronting a subject. There are certain obvious choices, here, like the films in the so-called "Pittsburgh Trilogy" where Brakhage quite clearly chose to film monolithic institutions (a hospital, a police force, a morgue) precisely because their presence as exterior, social authorities was a particular challenge to his individualistic, imaginative vision. Brakhage's virtuosic camera and editing manipulations aside, these films nevertheless began with a documentary premise and they are primarily about the attempt to bring under control subjects which are particularly difficult to face squarely, even without a camera. Less obvious, and perhaps more successful because the challenge was chosen less arbitrarily, is the long *Sincerity/Duplicity* series of the 1970s, in which the title itself raises a question of photographic or cinematic truth. A professed autobiography presupposes an adherence to experience lived apart from its filmic depiction. Certainly taking on the subject matter of one's mother, wife, and children in the cinematic continuity, must serve as a critical undermining of the confidence of one's own subjective vision. The other people an artist has lived with inhabit a stubborn, factual space whose close proximity is a constant, nagging reminder of contrary points of view which can neither be controlled or ignored.

With this "family drama" in mind, the trilogy of films Brakhage calls *The Weir-Falcon Saga* (1970), makes for an interesting case in point since Brakhage's own notes on the film mention an editing strategy which conformed to the spirit of a series of dreams he had, but they don't at all mention that a significant part of the subject matter of the film follows his young son through a period of illness and recovery, one of those accidental experiences of harsh reality which pose a particular challenge and thus must carry great emotional risks when turning it into even a highly imaginative cinematic series. A novelist can disguise his "from life" sources far more easily. Photographing someone while they are ill and under emotional duress (as Brakhage's son clearly is in a couple of shots), ironically bursts any dreamlike mode one might wish to sustain and brings upon the viewer a sense of photographic reality which has an almost voyeuristic intensity. In short, the central subject of *The Weir Falcon Saga* has a double-charged emotional quality of "outsideness" for its maker. There is the individual and separate being of his own son, and the spectre of illness itself, an experience which falls upon us accidentally and catches us unawares. Significantly, the middle part of the trilogy, *The Machine of Eden*, seems to seize a theme of "out-sideness" quite directly by way of a classic landscape mode. It is largely dominated by vast mountain shots of a luminous earth and sky—images of a daemonic beauty which, in the context of the trilogy, could be perhaps feverish visions or, since a fabric loom appears near the end of the film, they could be the signs of some vast inhuman process, the "machine" of nature, which dispenses illness and health alike.

It is worth noting how often we are brought face to face with wide vistas in the more celebrated of Brakhage's many films—perhaps not at all a surprising component of a filmmaker from the midwest who has long lived in Colorado. There are the twilight shots of high prairie presumably taken from a traveling car in *Anticipation of the Night*, the many mountainscapes in *Dog Star Man*, the central landscape texture of *The Machine of Eden* cited above, the dominance of a rather barren Alaskan landscape in *Creation*, and so forth. I find there is a spatial theme in the *Sincerity* series as well, which early on contains a running motif of traveling shots of wide open plains and develops into the prevalence of rather ominous winter mountainscapes towards the end. Certainly these "long shot" landscapes inevitably carry with them an underscoring of external presence, a photographic recognition of the "real" out there in deep perspective just as close-ups inevitably carry with them a sense of mental attention.

This admittedly simple observation gains in significance when one considers Brakhage's film work in the last decade or so, one in which he has devoted more and more time to hand-painted and hand-scratched films and far less to "photographic" works. In part, there is an economic issue involved here, since presumably short hand-painted films are less expensive to make. Nevertheless, when one looks at the two major "photographic" series of the 1990s, *Visions in Meditation I-IV* (1989-90) and the so-called "Vancouver Island films" (1991-2000), one has to concede that these are stunning works—among Brakhage's most memorable and moving—and in them a sense of wide open, even empty landscape prevails in which, if human figures are seen at all, they are often either de-emphasized or rather diminutive in the frame. The films also demonstrate a general tendency towards a greater subtlety of visual expression, one that employs less aggressive cross-cutting and camera manipulation. The imaginative transformation of his material, after years of practice, can now arise more gracefully (and I might add hauntingly) from the environments themselves in which he was filming.

Certainly Brakhage practices cinematic form in his own characteristic manner, yet this greater emphasis on "outsideness" and photographic space points to the fact that certain unique aspects of the photographic medium, as Deren understood them, have a kind of gravitational pull over time. One could say that his career has taken an odd circular route. The *Visions in Meditation* series is a particular case in point, since it came on the heels of a rare return on Brakhage's part to collaborative dramatic work in the series of *Faust* films (1987-89). This series was preceded by the surprising elements of psychodrama in *Sincerity IV* (1980) and *Confession* (1986). It is as if in making *Visions in Meditation*, Brakhage were recapitulating some thirty years later his exit from psychodrama—in this case a shift from the hermetically sealed world of a medieval legend, as it were, back out into the world at large. Taken as a whole, the four films in the *Visions* series express a vivid sense of traveling across the wide expanse of the North American Continent by car. In fact, in three of the four films, Brakhage has particularly cited the specific geographical location in his written notes: New England and Eastern Canada for the first part; Mesa Verde for the second; and D. H. Lawrence's abode in Taos for the last. The third part, subtitled, "Plato's Cave" has a location, too—but obviously a mythological or figurative one; as I hope to show, it's a telling exception. At any rate, I would argue that Brakhage has recapitulated Deren's cinematic, dialectical tensions into a "meditative series of landscapes and human symbolism."[7]

Throughout the series of four films, the camera emphasizes the great emptiness of continental space with only a faint and fleeting sense of human presence within it, which is, as I suggested earlier, seen in flashes of cross-cutting. This ultimately unifying visual motif hints that the title of the series plays on the notion of mystical visions in a desert or wilderness (the series opens with a shot of a church facade). In fact, with the exception of the first film, the entire series is set in an actual desert. Architectural structures bear the largest burden of standing for human signs, and they are treated like static, abstract, ultimately fragile, even tawdry, forms set up as a kind of defense against the wide, unstable, seemingly barren void which surrounds them. There is a kind of touching joke about the warmth and light of a cheap motel room—a brief way station of consolation on the long open road as it were.

The merely temporary existence of these structures as viable human shelters is especially emphasized in the "Mesa Verde" film, mostly shot at a spectacular site in Southern Colorado, of cliff dwellings abandoned for an unknown reason by their Native American inhabitants some 800 years ago. In some respects, Brakhage's camera approaches this place in the mode of a true tourist making a pilgrimage and recording his visit. A virtuosic series of cross-panning superimpositions of the ancient, empty dwellings along with cross-cutting to land and sky-scapes (see plate 1), yields a curious repetitive, ultimately static pattern of frustration. Brakhage really can't make the mystery of this place speak to him. He's stuck in a photographic world, as it were, making (relative to his other films) a simple-minded landscape film. His notes tell us that he was "compelled to introduce images which corroborate what the rocks said" (*CCC*). These images are extremely brief, black and white, insertions into the color texture. They are "found material": silent, medical footage of epileptics made at the turn of the century and preserved by the Library of Congress. The shots are eerily superimposed like flickering ghost images and they express a disturbing quality suggestive of one of the prevailing and controversial theories of the Mesa Verde ruins. One school of anthropologists believes the site to be the vestiges of a failed civilization, one which had succumbed to a reign of cannibalistic terror by a ruling class which, in turn, precipitated a flight of its people south into Arizona and New Mexico. Brakhage says that the rocks "spoke to him," but my sense is that the film admirably expresses a double failure: his camera, by itself, as it obsessively scans the ruins again and again, even resorting to superimposition, cannot get that external presence to speak to him. Therefore he is compelled to edit in alien material, to impose expressive "symbols" onto mere photographic presence in

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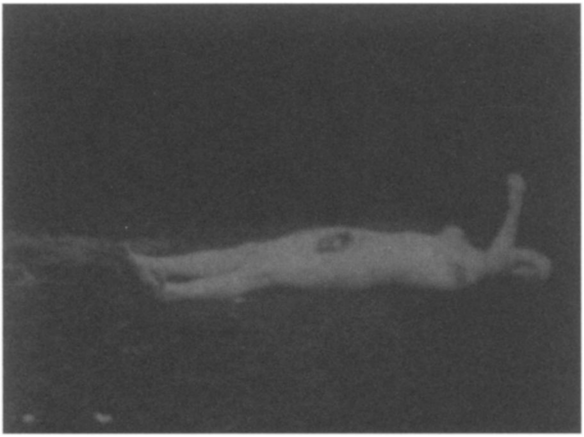
[7] Brakhage's note to *Visions in Meditation #1* (*CCC*).



a way which makes the artificial gesture obvious despite its impressive technical prowess. In short, in a stroke of self-irony, Brakhage's own symbolic gestures, despite their "necessity," are shown to have the same fleeting "tawdriness" of other, generally architectural symbols he has shot in the previous part of the series. Interestingly enough, by traveling south to New Mexico, in the fourth and last film, subtitled "D. H. Lawrence," Brakhage has roughly re-traced the route of the mysterious Native American Tribe in order to visit the former home of a celebrated twentieth-century poet and novelist who likewise retreated into the desert from a failed civilization.

But it is in the third part of the *Visions* series, "Plato's Cave," that an exploitation of real camera presence is made most ironically powerful. The film opens with a series of barren landscapes which are oddly dreamlike thanks to the presence of continual panning and occasional dissolves that are accompanied by an electronic score from a rare musical collaborator, in this case, Rick Corrigan. The film seems to carry us into a "cave" and out again, into the glare of the desert sun, a progression which perhaps approximates Plato's myth from *The Republic*: philosophy leads us from the chimerical world of illusion into the harsh glare of reality itself. Towards the end of the film, what "reality itself" has to offer is a series of eerie shots of a so-called "dust devil"—a swirl of dirt and loose brush caught in an updraft generated by high, static desert heat (see plate 2). The camera gazes on the fleeting phenomenon, once again, as a tourist's would—that is, Brakhage places it squarely in the center of the frame and keeps shooting, rewinding the camera (evidently) and shooting it again—a gesture which captures his accidentally coming upon it and its powerful and even threatening allure which nevertheless stands now quite outside the formalized dreamlike landscape shots with which the film begins. Its "outsideness" is emphasized by another accident: a fence can be seen in the mid-ground, between the camera and the dust devil. And then, just as we begin to wonder why the filmmaker is lingering on this "meaningless shot," Brakhage responds to this outside presence with the slightest gesture, a camera sweep, which seems to ever so fleetingly mirror the movement of the dust devil. Brakhage is taking the first step of formal control beyond the neutral point of naïve photography, and making a "creative use of reality," if you will, but then the film instantly plunges into black leader.

The presence of the music over the black leader shows us that the film is still going and helps us to make a connection and read this non-space as a deep space—as Plato's cave once again. We are back in the world of illusion and mental darkness but only on terms which we recognize as clearly symbolic and not representational (i.e. photographic). The shot holds long enough that we begin to have time to study our own reading of the image and see precisely how context has imposed an image (the cave) on a non-image (black leader). Brakhage's own notes help us to see this final gesture as a brilliantly ironic response to Plato: "The film is, I believe, a vision of mentality as most people must (to the irritation of Plato) have it, safely encaved and metaphorical, for the nervous system to survive" (*CCC*). The barren desert landscape and glaring sun is merely a "phenomenological world," and as such it is "uninhabitable." The entire "vision" of the cave is a mental construct resting on nothing except our own human necessity to make such constructs to live within. Paradoxically, of course, that threatening exterior world only has presence as a symbol, too, in the figure of the "dust devil." Plato's cave is the locus we find ourselves in when we try to get *any* meaning from *any* visual phenomenon, even if we are trying to render utter meaninglessness. To my way of thinking, this is a cinematic ending which lives up to the philosophic enterprise of the *Visions* series as a whole, as well as to the title of this particular film. It is also a "dramatic close" not dissimilar from the one discussed earlier in the first part of *Dog Star Man*, except that here the filmic gesture in and of itself, so characteristic of the later Brakhage, is much more refined and gives off a sense of effortlessness to the extent that an unsuspecting viewer may miss it altogether. There is less heroism and more quietude, which befits the relative shift to a greater photographic transparency.

§

One clear objection to the general thrust of my argument can be made from the observation that the vast majority of Brakhage's films from the last few years have been in the abstract, painterly mode, a trend which runs counter to Deren's prescriptions of over fifty years earlier.

Apart from the possible determining factors of economics mentioned earlier, it is entirely possible that Brakhage's enterprise as a painter/filmmaker only makes, in turn, the special, dialectical mode of the photographic works all the more vivid. In a long booklength conversation with the painter and printmaker Philip Taaffe, Brakhage seems to recognize the distinction:

> SB: I don't mean to be presumptuous, but maybe at this point in your evolution you're painting the space as thought would have it, rather than space in the exterior world. How one might *think* a region, rather than a reflection upon an exterior one.
>
> PT: That's a very good point. Painted space is mental space.
>
> SB: And that again puts you in alignment with what I think is the important and necessary continuum of the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic: they were the first to paint closed-eye vision. They painted it without knowing it, without being conscious of it.[8]

Note that Brakhage reads the Abstract Expressionist movement, a movement he views as closely bound up with his early, crucially formative period of the 1950s, from a point of view which tries to deemphasize a notion of painterly innovation for its own sake. Rather, he sees abstraction, at least a particular practice of it, as if it were a visual record of a perceptual phenomenon—in Brakhage's sense, of hypnogogic or "closed-eye" vision. This only confirms, I think, that Brakhage's willful and bold flights of interior imagination have always achieved their cinematic forcefulness by not losing sight of that which, within his chosen medium, opposes them and threatens, in fact, to make them lose their way.

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[8] Philip Taaffe, *Composite Nature: A Conversation with Stan Brakhage* (NY: Peter Blum, 1998), p. 116.

MARIE NESTHUS

The "Document" Correspondence of Stan Brakhage

Throughout Stan Brakhage's career, the quality most often ascribed to his work has been "visionary." Certainly many of the statements the filmmaker has made over the years concerning his motives and methods have evoked such an understanding. Indeed, he has encouraged the development of a critical vocabulary concerning his work that centered around the presentation of a "way of seeing." However, Brakhage has also insisted, from the very beginning of his film career, upon the relationship of his film work to the world around him. The films themselves testify to the range of his attention. In his work Brakhage has depicted the daily, seasonal, and enduring processes of nature and of human nature. He has scrutinized flora and fauna, pondered geology and cosmology. He has meditated upon the society within which he and his family and all other Americans live. Through the imagery he has extracted from his surroundings, he has contemplated its assumptions, its belief systems, its practices—its institutions and its structures. He has confronted its taboos. His films on sexuality and death have been landmark explorations of the territory, and have inspired controversy as much for the daring of their subject matter as for their treatment of it.

Despite Brakhage's occasional claim that he may be the "most documentary of filmmakers," he has been consistently critical of documentary film techniques. Troubled by what he considers to be the unquestioning identification of film or television imagery with the complex reality existing in front of any camera, he has consistently foregrounded this skepticism by reminding his friends and colleagues as well as his students and audiences of the built-in perspectival conventions that a camera lens imposes, and by drawing their attention to what he believes are the "19th-century dramatic structures" lurking behind the presentation of television news and many documentary films.

From the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, while Brakhage was coming into his own as a filmmaker, the documentary film was undergoing a transformation in style and practice as well as an accompanying surge of popularity. Changes in documentary technique, style, and theory would come to serve throughout these years as a ground for Brakhage's changing style. The positing of an ideal documentary form, in which the subject of the film could be captured directly, without any interpretative fashioning of the filmmaker—as held against the acknowledgment of the likelihood, the desirability, and ultimately, even the inevitability of the filmmaker's shaping sensibility—provided documentary filmmakers with a central dilemma, complex and highly significant for both their theories and their practices in the 1960s and throughout the 1970s. As a consequence of the range of theoretical views of documentary that were being put forth, which included the sense that documentary film had a specific and intimate relationship with the life around it, the documentary became a particularly vibrant and vital form during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This dynamism attracted many filmmakers to the intricacies of its practice. Among those filmmakers was Stan Brakhage, who had come to include such masters of documentary form as Richard Leacock and Robert Gardner among his colleagues and friends.

After the completion of *Dog Star Man* (1961-1964) and on through the late 1960s, changes in Brakhage's filmmaking practice became increasingly evident. Although he moved quite swiftly from *Dog Star Man* to *Songs* (1964-1966) and from *Songs* to *Scenes from under Childhood* (1967-70), Brakhage's correspondence from 1965 onward delineated a nearly continuous dissatisfaction and occasionally a degree of desperation in his search for new creative methods.[1]

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[1] The *Brakhage Scrapbook* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1982) is the most complete public source for Brakhage's thinking during this evolutionary period. Nearly a third of the book is devoted to material related to the *Songs*, *Scenes from under Childhood*, and Brakhage's anti-war film *23rd Psalm Branch* (1966). Included in the *Scrapbook* are relevant letters to Guy Davenport, Robert Kelly, P. Adams Sitney, and Bruce Baillie; interviews with Richard Grossinger and Hollis Frampton; and Brakhage's contemplation of the work of Marie Menken and his own *23rd Psalm Branch*.

Brakhage's first efforts to change his style resulted in an increased simplicity of presentation. A tension had arisen in his working methods in films made during this time between what he had come to view as the primacy of the photography, as it captured what had been in front of the camera, and his own need as an artist to shape the film experience. Brakhage followed *Scenes* with the comparatively more direct, but still Brakhage-family-centered three-film series *The Weir-Falcon Saga* (1970). Then, at the Pittsburgh premiere of *The Weir-Falcon Saga*, Brakhage began his plans, with the assistance of Carnegie Museum programmer Sally Dixon and Pittsburgh Press photographer Mike Chikiris, for what would become a film series on Pittsburgh. In these works, Brakhage would confront what he has called his "bogeymen." In *eyes* (1971), the footage he shot as he accompanied Pittsburgh cops in their daily and nightly rounds in a police car included the discovery of a dead body on a street. In *Deus Ex* (1971), his exploration of the workings of a Pittsburgh hospital included an operating room sequence in which open-heart surgery was being performed.

Stan Brakhage shooting *The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes* at the Allegheny County Morgue in Pittsburgh, 1971. Photo by Michael Chikiris.

After completing *Deus Ex*, Brakhage traveled to Pittsburgh one more time to gather footage for his Pittsburgh film project. On his third (and, it turned out, final) trip in late September 1971, Brakhage spent three days filming under the auspices of the Allegheny County Coroner. The experience of filming in the County Morgue affected the filmmaker profoundly. Six weeks after returning from Pittsburgh, Brakhage remained troubled to the degree that he found it impossible to begin the process of forming his footage into a film.

On November 8th, Brakhage began a letter to Annette Michelson. The letter would be the first in a series of missives unique within Brakhage's voluminous correspondence. The letters, eight in number (as he would later specify in a letter to Hugh Kenner) are long, detailed, complex, and central to Brakhage's concentrated and extensive thinking about a topic he found both elusive and inescapable, the role of Document in art. Even the state in which these letters are preserved within his archival papers mark their importance to their author. Multiple copies exist of each letter, copies that are found spread throughout his papers in different contexts. Several of the letters are fitted with blank cover pages that provide dates and descriptions (e.g., "Letter to Ed Dorn, November 24, 1971").[2]

There were six recipients of these letters: film critic Annette Michelson, filmmakers James Broughton and Hollis Frampton, poets Robert Creeley and Ed Dorn, and filmmaker, journalist, and director of Anthology Film Archives Jonas Mekas. For Brakhage these specific people represented different arenas within which he wished to consider the questions gnawing at him. With one exception, they were people with whom Brakhage had sustained close and longstanding, though not necessarily untroubled, relationships. And they were, each one, people for whom Brakhage had a deep and abiding respect.

The letters were unusually long for Brakhage, in one instance reaching eight single-spaced, typed pages. Throughout this correspondence, Brakhage adapted his inquiry to what he envisioned as each correspondent's areas of expertise. In some letters, the discussion is amplified by Brakhage's detailed response to his correspondent's work, or by an evocation of a shared aesthetic or experience. Brakhage's exploration of the role of Document in art throughout the correspondence remained multi-layered, nuanced, and continually in process. His goal was not the determination of a static, however complete, definition. Rather, he sought a series of clarifications that enabled him to meet the challenge he had set for himself in the third film of the “Pittsburgh Trilogy,” and to move beyond that to begin an entirely new exploration in film.

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[2] An extensive archive of Brakhage's personal papers, audio tapes, books, and artifacts are presently housed in the archives of The Museum of Modern Art. The collection's holdings span well over four decades, and include Brakhage's extensive personal correspondence. The Brakhage archive, however, awaits a buyer, and has not been readied for scholarly perusal; it remains in need of archival organization and cataloging.

The specific impetus for this extensive and ultimately transformational correspondence seems to have been a phone conversation with Annette Michelson. Brakhage writes to Broughton:

> I spent the last two days writing a long letter on aesthetics to Annette Michelson. I’ll xerox a copy and mail it to you Friday. When I go to town. It’s a beaut!—several years thought condensed and intelligently powdered. [...] A brief phone conversation with her prompted the clearest logic I’ve managed yet respecting my newest work. It is, of course, the rejection of that work (reports coming in from all over the country) which lights up those thoughts within me...coming out now as glow-eyed dragons. [November 10, 1971]

Michelson had included Brakhage’s *eyes* in the “New Forms in Film” exhibition she had curated for the Guggenheim Museum in the summer of 1971. Brakhage particularly appreciated this vote of confidence from an influential, modernist critic in the broad climate of rejection that had greeted his first two Pittsburgh films.

To Michelson, Brakhage couched his central argument in film historical terms.

> The basic distinction I’m here-after making between the Lumiére Bros. and Georges Méliès is that the former accepted the machine-invented ‘world’ of film and proceeded to discover the intrinsic possibilities of The Art of Film [...] whereas George Méliès was the first filmmaker so obsessed as to have to follow along a line of thought-sight, to pitch his inner vision in relation to those of all others in the late Romantic grab-bag. [...] George Méliès art proclaims itself as such: Art![...] The Lumiére Bros. more simply solidly were, in the more-than-less settled bourgeois and science worshipping ‘world’ of the late 19th century. [...] Consider the relationship between The Lumiére Bros. and, say, Jan Vermeer (perhaps the first painter to use camera optics) and Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin. [...] What these men may be said to share is both a similarity of life-style AND the natural tendency in their works for The Art of them to remain invisible, or nearly so! [November 8, 1971]

This passage, remarkable for its critique of Méliès as a filmmaker "obsessed," an artist poised "to pitch his inner vision in relation to those of all others in the late Romantic grab-bag," seems equally to be a barb pointed at those critics insisting that Brakhage's work be considered as primarily existing within the late Romantic tradition.[3] It is also notable that Brakhage, in embracing the Lumiére tradition here, is acknowledging its acceptance of "the machine-invented 'world' of film," a point not irrelevant to the titles of two Brakhage films from this transitional period—*The Machine of Eden* (1970) and *Deus Ex* [Machina] (1971). A final point of interest, given Brakhage's often spirited defense of his family-centered life in the Colorado mountains, is the invocation of the "more-than-less settled bourgeois" world of the Lumiére Bros and Brakhage's noting of the "similarity of life-style" to others working in the same artistic tradition.

Given the deaths late in 1970 of Willard Maas and Marie Menken, James Broughton could be considered one of the few survivors of a generation of filmmakers who had served as exemplars and mentors to the young Brakhage. At this time, Broughton and Brakhage had been in relatively close touch with one another. Broughton had dedicated *Tidings* (1965), a book of his poetry, to Brakhage, and had also sent the younger filmmaker a copy of his collected poems, *The Long Undressing* (1971). Brakhage addressed the second of his Document letters to Broughton, and, as can be noted in the excerpt above, sent a copy of his letter to Michelson along.

To Broughton, Brakhage wrote a detailed history of the development of the Pittsburgh film project, with an emphasis on the role that Michael Chikiris had played both in the inception of the project and as a, literally, working model for Brakhage of the process of documentation. Brakhage praised Chikiris's work to Broughton:

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[3] During the late 1960s and early 1970s, P. Adams Sitney had established the Anglo-American literary tradition of Romanticism as a touchstone for his interpretative study of the American avant-garde movement in general, with Brakhage as a central exemplar. This work was to culminate in the 1974 publication of his book *Visionary Film* (Oxford UP). Sitney's terminology, elegantly argued and directed to specific films, was later applied broadly and loosely by some critics to Brakhage's entire oeuvre, and used to laud or decry Brakhage's work in general.

> You cannot find a better 'Pittsburgh Journal' than among the hundreds of thousands of pictures he's taken in the course of his work and private life there.

Brakhage also admired Chikiris's ability to retain artistic standards within the sometimes stringent confines of his journalistic (documentary) obligations.

> He was at this time already a photographer with The Pittsburgh Press, was giving his very best to that institute, even tho' that 'best' was seldom used in print, struggling all the same to maintain highest photographic standards within himself both on the job and off—in short, sustaining what is called "a madness" in American Culture which is either supposed-to grow-up out-of (a disillusioned step-at-a-time) or else is expected to give 'insanely' into until one joins 'the jobless', becomes known as 'artist', etc. Well you know Mike (or at least have met him); so you know how he's still walking the nerve-tight 'rope' of his integrity—crazier than you and me put together, James...dear Mike—"what nerve!", as one would say from either side of the 'balance' he's maintaining.

Brakhage's detailed account of the production history of his recent work had been prompted by Broughton's expression of interest "the other night on the phone that you now wanted to make a film more in the direction of these newest works of mine." He then directed Broughton's attention to their shared interest in film document:

> You'll note especially the comments I make apropro "the tradition of The Lumiére Bros." and "Comedy" in my letter to Annette. The threads of this 'new' aesthetic (with its Lumiére roots at the very beginning of Film) woof their way thru the happy warps of all your earlier work; and that you should now come at it via The Document (and we must get rid of that "ary" at end "document") thrills me!

Brakhage ended the letter in an exuberantly documentary spirit: "Looking forward, then, to a 'That is That' from you!"

The poetic implications of Brakhage's search for the principles and possibilities of Document inspired him to get back in touch with his friend, the poet Robert Creeley. Brakhage and Creeley, who had met in 1962, had shared a continuous, if infrequent, correspondence; a reverence for Pound; and a friendship with Charles Olson (Brakhage's a single encounter and brief correspondence, and Creeley's an extensive correspondence, a collegial relationship at Black Mountain College, and a long-standing friendship). Brakhage and Creeley also shared an interest in the challenges and possibilities of their respective "continuity" arts.

Brakhage began the letter with a declaration of his need for Creeley's counsel.

> I don't like to fuss you with matters that may not be of any immediate concern to you; but I am rather desperate to get some new fix on thoughts which I've stirred these last several weeks. I'm in a bind; and you're the only person I can imagine entertaining some few questions of this letter meaningfully.
>
> (It is hard to write to you now that thus much time has past since we last met.) [November 22, 1971]

Having forwarded to Creeley copies of his letters to Michelson and Broughton, Brakhage broached his topic immediately and straightforwardly:

> The Document in Art: That term centers my concern (as you already know from those letters-to-others I've recently sent your way). Now, how to demonstrate the wide-angle I've got on it—make it clear that I understand every art has at least one toe securely 'Doc't'...

Brakhage began by referring to a Harry Callahan photograph that the two men had previously spoken of together.

> Take that favored Callahan image (the one you once called 'favorite' in my presence) of his wife nude on the bed, the baby, the window, the radiator, etc. Beyond simply being the document every work-of-art is, that image also comes thru to me like...what?—a report, that's it!...both senses of the word—it echoes in the mind like ten-pound real-estate 'abstract' (as they call them), slam down on the negotiating table. It feels to me as strongly thus as if it had

> graph-lines, cross-bars, or side-notch-indicators, like those images from gun-cameras, periscopes, and the like. The fact that Harry has written his survey-marks invisibly all over that image only makes it haunt my imagination that much stronger.

After articulating as clearly as he could the intensity and precision of Callahan's imagery, Brakhage asked Creeley "I'm wondering if you agree—that is, does this image also seem Document (along with everything else it is) in the special sense I've indicated above?"

Brakhage then moved to consideration of Document in poetry, and first, specifically, to Pound[4]:

> Now to stick with Poetry a bit, see what I can bite off in the same context. The case of The Document and E.P.'s Cantos seems clear (even the aestheticians have written about it); but is it? By self-testimony (in tone), by quote, by ideogram Ezra does get History to stand for itself, visibly report, whole hogs of it running (not loose but) in circles of themselves, well tethered to the rhythms of the poem developing. [...] "A portable British Museum"?—well, yes!, in the personal sense of Pound's jotting down everything he might care to refer to: and THAT's a key to Document...i.e. when one makes something that solidly to-refer-to, then the energy runs THAT way, leaving the work oddly free of its references (where-from, etc.)—reference can stop with reference-to and NOT pass through the Poem to Poem's source. But the style of The Cantos (Pound's terribly visible signature every half sentence, sputtered abbreviations, etc.) does leak energy through Document to refer-to the personae of The Maker, Ezra-himself, in a way that a real-estate 'abstract' doesn't, doesn't refer to the feeling of the land, the sight of it, its possibilities.

One can conclude from this passage that Brakhage, at this stage in his career, was dissatisfied, even alienated, by what he saw as Pound's

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[4] The poetry of Ezra Pound played a central role in the formulation of Brakhage's aesthetic throughout the course of his career. On his sixteenth birthday, he had been given a volume of Pound's *Cantos* as a gag gift. He came to describe that work as "the single most important book" in his life. The grave reservations concerning Pound's methods that Brakhage is expressing here were confined to this period of Brakhage's work.

"terribly visible signature" in the poet's work, although notably, in Harry Callahan's work Brakhage had just placed a value on the potency that resulted from that artist's "survey-marks [written] invisibly all over that image." The critical difference, thus, seemed not to be in the presence or absence of the artist's mark, but rather in the degree of its visibility. Brakhage saw Callahan's treatment of his subject as intensifying the viewer's experience while scrupulously avoiding interpretation.

Brakhage went on to contrast Pound's first Cantos with the early versions known as Ur-Cantos, to the detriment of the later poems, despite what he considered to be their greater emphasis on Document.

> I cannot get over the haunt of those early versions of the first several Cantos... They are much less Document-oriented and much less referential THRU Pound-source. Two shifts then (when he rewrote those Cantos): more stoppage of The Reader at the poem (making of it a collection of documents) AND more sense of Ezra (individuation of style). Question (if you know these early versions of the Cantos): Is this price necessary?—i.e., does The Artist automatically have to 'come on strong'ly individual in order to Stop The Reader's (his) attention AT the work he's made?

Brakhage contrasted what he saw as Pound's overly literary model of Document with that of Gertrude Stein, setting her mastery of inclusiveness against Pound's self-conscious and studied allusiveness.

> Let me take up Gertrude Stein as Document-maker to get an opposite spectacle on the matter[...]. Simple Question: Do we get A Document solidly-enough by making the poem all inclusive—so there's nothing left-over to refer-to?

Brakhage's varying experience of James Joyce and Charles Olson raised still other questions. He saw the two as "extremes" of the question of "reference," noting that Joyce sent him running to the encyclopedia whereas Olson's work, "MORE recalcitrant to reference," threw him back upon his own resources. Pound and Joyce thus provided for Brakhage two early models of modernism whose works required a puzzling out to understand their arcane reference. Stein and Olson, on the other hand, built their art from the details of the world, allowing the representation of the world to exist sufficiently within the work itself.

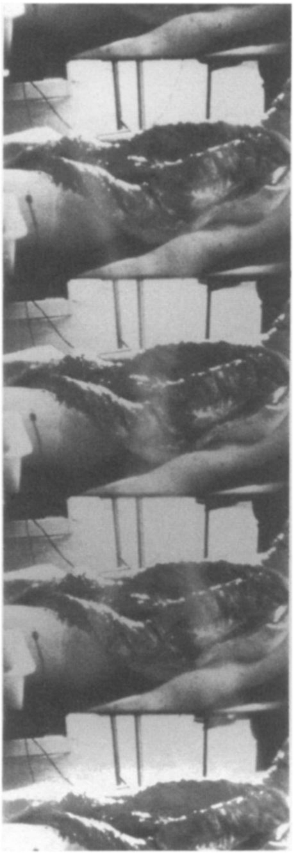
Brakhage was grappling with what he sensed were the changing requirements of the time, and intuiting that Creeley, within his recent work, had done the same. He sensed a diminishment of the Creeley persona, a greater directness within the work.

> Americans (and perhaps the whole Western World now) are after a good hard look [...]. As I read you, Robert, the personalized lilt (even the breath-breaks which Olson allotted us) of your earlier poems disappears in "Pieces" and most later work. The Robert Creeley which Readers had made-up when reading "For Love" has all but vanished, leaving them up against themselves, as the poem bounces them back upon their own means; but "Pieces" throws no curve. [...] For tho' I read "Pieces" again and again, I get no reference to hang any poem upon, least of all any You/The Poet—no!, there are some few "leaks" there...like hang-overs of "For Love" (and these I foolishly liked 'the best' at first, these 'remainders, minders'—but the whole of it is in "Pieces", like you say, and resists all that traction which Readers could easily attach their references-to in earlier poems.

Brakhage's letter to Creeley is a very thorough-going and thoughtful one, even given the context of the "Document" letters. It is likely that Brakhage reached out to Creeley not only because of his own artistry and his knowledge of poetry and Pound in particular, but also because he had provided invaluable assistance to Brakhage at an earlier juncture in this troubling transition. In his letter, Brakhage recalled Creeley's response to the first section of *Lovemaking* (1968).

> This IS all actually a pickup from the last good conversation we had together. You were here in my cabin and had just seen the newly-finished "Lovemaking One"; and you were offended to the extent of having been made voyeur, frustrated that you were blocked by the 'other man' in the picture, and so forth. The very visible ART of the film had moved you into 'first place'/'base'. The 'other man' had kept you (as surely as those logs Cezanne throws down across paths into his pictures) from entering the screen. You were beautifully clear about it; and the following three "Lovemaking"

films benefited much from your comments. I have found myself moving increasingly through those following three "Lovemakings" toWARD voyeurism via Document. All that might be easily regarded as Self-Expression (or what we have come to most easily recognize as Art in this century) became (in the later "Lovemakings") an invisible container. This proclivity has increased in most of my work since. Some of the obvious manifestations of that direction are my selling all sound equipment, giving away chemicals, eschewing lab effects which would be obvious as such and giving up those forms of editing which operate as absolute control over the immediate means of photography. [...] I am now up-and-down to tone and rhythm in the editing process.



The presentation of the subject as directly as possible, in an "invisible container"—to remove, to the highest degree possible, all artistic "logs." This is the goal, as Brakhage sits down to edit *The Act of Seeing.*

And I am beginning work on a film photographed at The Pittsburgh Morgue. It has come to be called: "The Act of Seeing...with one's own eyes": That is the most literal meaning of "autopsy" and is exactly the impulse which moved me to undergo such a terrible series of sessions of photography. [...] At first I kept telling people that I intended to interweave these Morgue images with mountain-ranges, moons, suns, snow, clouds, etc.—the mind leaping to escape in every conceivable symbol...as it had while I was photographing. [...] One good look at the footage (once the lab had processed these three thousand-some feet) and I knew it was impossible (for me now anyway) to interrupt THIS parade of the dead with ANYthing whatsoever, any "escape" a blasphemy, even the 'escape' of Art as I had come to know it. This gathering of images (rather than editing) had to be straight.

At the time Brakhage wrote his first Document letter to Hollis Frampton (also on November 22), the two filmmakers had not yet met. Brakhage had, however, just screened Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* in his house for his family and himself, and had been very impressed with the film. After many paragraphs extolling the film's accomplishments, he exclaimed, "Besides all this, it is hellish fun to watch." Brakhage's discussion of Frampton's film included a reference to its last shot as "the solidest Document of filmmaker's END I've ever seen [...]—the final edge flares giving us a greening of those trees for Spring before their 'blank' and resultant 'black mtn.' after-image. Wonderful!"

To Frampton, Brakhage also brought up the subject of Document in the context of documentary film.

> I am most concerned in my work at the moment with Document (as distinct, as I can make it, from Documentary—knocking that "airy" off the end giving me the sense I am escaping that rhetoric and outright propaganda associated with "Old Doc" school of film making...that I would rescue "ment" for some end in absolute—hoping to get the Latin's documentum sense of "example" in the first place...where "documentary"'s "lesson" now sits). My photography of late has led me to a gathering of images (rather than editing) which refers-to its Source (say Policemen, Hospital Corridors', etc., as in "eyes" and "Deus Ex") rather than reflect that Source; that is, the images and the order/rhythms/tones of their 'gathering' tend to make all reference terminate in the film, thus bouncing energy back only on The Viewer, his Policemen, Men, etc., his Hospital Corridors, hallways, alleys, tubes, what-have-him. I'm coming to believe that, along this line of recent work, I've stumbled upon a way to plug yet another energy-leak in Art (in a line with Charles Olson's "getting the energy of the poem all the way over to The Reader"). A 'concealed art' and a lack of obvious 'self-expression' are essential along this 'tack.' [November 22, 1971]

The stylistic differences between the two filmmakers seemed to be a factor in Brakhage's decision to enlist Frampton's participation in his exploration.

> Anyway, as opposites attract (or old wives say so), let's write—if

> you like; I'd be very happy to have your thoughts on these matters, most especially those relating to Document...if any sense of that term has haunted your working processes.

Brakhage informed Frampton that he would soon be editing *The Act of Seeing*—"the gathering of these images is about to begin"—and that he was reaching out to others in preparation for the daunting task:

> I am writing writing these days (letters every which way) to empty my mind of all these previousnesses. I too (like many in audiences who have booed hissed and walked-out on "eyes" and "Deux Ex") wish, in my laziness, I could simply have gone on with, say, "Son of Dog Star Man", "Dog Star Man Meets the Wolf Man", "Bride of Dog Star Man", even "Bud Abbott and Lou Costello Meet..." etc. But instead, as usual, all trains of thought have leapt the tracks.

It is clear that although he would welcome whatever guidance would be possible, Brakhage realized that the very act of writing these letters was the essential part of his preparation to work:

> Any, especially 'geographical', survey you might send, any old treasure map you've minded, would help; for I am, as usual, exhausting all thought to liven the synapses preparatory for work; thus I'm not just making up a conversation with you but rather more-or-less 'hollaring in the dark'.

And he returned, once again, to the necessity he was experiencing in his work for the detail, the specific—not the idea, not the infinite.

> Let me give you something specific to go on. It is not "infinite cinema" [...]—NOT that that I'm after, at the moment. [...] I mean, I figure if I can get the "grain of sand" (as Blake puts it) the INfinite'll take care of itself.

Brakhage's extraordinary overture to Frampton ended with a statement of genuine admiration.

> I think I'd rather meet you than any man I've heard of, seen work thereof, within the last several years.

Two days later, Brakhage wrote to Ed Dorn, another of his poet friends. While they had been somewhat out of touch, Brakhage had during this time been able to visit Dorn, then living in Chicago, fairly regularly as he traveled to Chicago every other week to teach at the School of the Art Institute. He refers to his visits to the Dorns at the very beginning of the letter.

> It seems strange to write to you when I will probably see you before this letter reaches your house. [...] But anyway I'd write as I said I would that last wonderful visit with you, because there are things which simply cannot be mouthed outright; lips just don't spit mindfully. [November 24, 1971]

Brakhage began his pronouncements to Dorn with a complaint about the expectations with which the "Public" greeted his work:

> Okay, well, to get down to some of these brass tacks I'm carrying around in my teeth. [...] I'd thought any Public what's-the-matter (with my work, life, etc.) was settled once it had become clear to me why Parker Tyler (and his critical relatives) rejected "Anticipation of the Night" and most of my films from there on. [...] I'd taken a turn in 1957 which not only emptied the Brakhage bandwagon then but set it on a course which would inevitably bounce all those who later climbed on for Romantic's sake, those who must have mistook "Dog Star Man" as Roland's last stand. [...] Those are cowboy boots "Dog Star Man" is wearing; and he doesn't die with 'em but rather becomes a STAR (in McClure's sense of the word), a cluster of stars or, if you want to get that specific, sits down at last in Cassiopeia's Chair...and then finishes as a streetlight!

He saw in Dorn's recent work a parallel rejection of an earlier style:

> "The Cycle" has helped me a lot. I mean it's NOT a bicycle built for two; and I don't think your Romantic followers are going to be able to ride in on it unless they're courageous enough to sit on the handle bars.

To Dorn, he once again invoked a panoply of modernist writers, this time representing each as having come, through a creative crisis or life experience, to a more direct mode of expression in their work.

> [W]e ALL got somewhat where we're going via Ezra Pound's 1910 London dilemma (up against Dreams per SAY, shunning BOTH Freud and Zola, etc.) and Gertrude Stein's turn-o-the-century job as a court reporter. Damn, damn, damn rings through all Pound thereon, his firing his reports, solid documents more straight than facts; but "Damn it all, Robert Browning", "Damn your sensibilities", etc., all the same. Charles [Olson] finally laid it 'on the line' of talk, his created self talking; but it is "listening and talking at the same time" (as Stein defines "genius") which informs. Charles' drive is to get it OUT, 'on the table'. Gertrude makes 'the table' possible—like, she (I think) helps you get through the beginning of "From the Fall of Anytime", helps you get "The furnishings" "flat", helps Creeley come to "Pieces".

Brakhage then made a similar swoop through art history to find a model for his present predicament. He ends by quoting the art historian Walter Pater on the work of the painter Giorgione.

> He is the inventor of genre, of those easily movable pictures which serve neither for uses of devotion, nor for allegorical or historic teaching—little groups of real men and women, amid congruous furniture or landscape—morsels of actual life, conversation or music or play, but refined upon or idealised, till they come to seem like glimpses of life from afar.

Pater had recognized that Giorgione's depiction of "real men and woman" was necessarily "refined upon or idealised" to provide the requisite distance for the viewer—the lack of engagement, the termination of reference in the work itself that Brakhage had been striving for. While the filmmaker could embrace that tradition, he also realized that the project immediately facing him would carry him beyond the common experience of that visual art tradition.

> If I'd had that road-map (and could've understood it) ten years ago, I'd have known where I was going directly these last six years; and "eyes" would have been no surprise to me at all, nor why I whittled my editing responsibilities down to Tone and Rythm, as most clearly seen in "Deus Ex". But the present case (The Morgue

> footage) pushes me to a further extreme [...] for single shots (of The Morgue footage) carry shifts in specks of tone and rhythm which "Deus Ex" took dozens of shots to more obviously (obvious as cut) accomplish; whereas "eyes" ran more along its several lines of various stories, with its 'rimes' of colors often forced, as in verse, its rythms sprung by the 'action' it was following—"get the action", like they say..."shoot first and ask questions later", as you put it; but that's just IT, that I have NO questions apropo The Morgue footage—no 'story'...or linear presents itself, as the title I've given the work-in-progress makes clear: "The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes".
>
> It, this "Act" pushes further than any Pater 'fix' on Giorgione.

This letter too was serving Brakhage as a preparation for his work. He would soon begin the task he had set himself, of dealing directly with the nearly unendurable, and of marshalling his skills to fashion an art at once tightly controlled and nearly completely concealed.

> All this rattling of verbal sabres! Well, that's my way of shucking Tradit!-la-la before going to WORK. I mean, all I've got to do now is follow the pictures I've already took and cut out the mis-takes—ah, but there's the rub: I gotta know these 'picts' like the back of my hand and STOP all inclination to palm-reading...should be the easiest film in the world to 'cut' BUT—I'm scared to...Death, is it?—the Art so subtly concealed I've spent two months trying to pick-up on its gossamer trails, at times fearing terribly I was reading "emperor's New Clothes" INto it. Who'll EVER be able to see it on the screen? Well, I will; and for the rest, that's their problem—tho' it's liable to become mine, economically speaking (as audiences and old friends are already booing/hissing and rejecting "eyes" and "Deus Ex")...and I'm just hoping I don't find myself in the absurd position of lecturing on the Art of these recent films in specific detail when it's managed to conceal itself as beautifully as it has; and there you have the rub UP against the grain of viewers—I mean, that it's so easy to solve their problems when you can talk about an Art that rides obviously off in all Symbolical directions that that's all really that's ever BEEN talked about. And that's a side-effect, I'd say. It is a 'leak' in what I'd like to call that Document/Art we've all (especially Americans last century) been after.

The letter to Ed Dorn was the last of the Document letters to be written before the completion of *The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes* and with it, the "Pittsburgh Trilogy." When Brakhage sat down again to write his next Document letter, this time in January 1972, to Jonas Mekas, it was not to prepare himself for the challenges of a specific film, but rather to understand the challenges that lay before him in Document, and to lament the lack of appreciation that he believed had prevailed too long in the critical climate of independent cinema for this potentially powerful cinematic form. Mekas, as director of Anthology Film Archives, and Brakhage, as one of its founders, had worked together on Anthology's Board in the selection of the group of films known as "Essential Cinema." Prior to his resignation from that Board, Brakhage had argued strenuously against the inclusion of traditional documentary in this canon. In this letter, several years later, he argues, in quite a conversionary tone, for a deeper appreciation of the possibilities of Document.

> The historical weaknesses in selecting films for Anthology Film Archives are Documentary and Comedy. I have touched on these in previous letters. In fact, much of my life these last three years has been directly prompted by aesthetic confusion I discerned when I was voting along with the rest of you. I have picked up loose threads in my earlier films (such as "Window Water Baby Moving" and "Lovemaking") and centered my concentration upon the creative possibilities of Document in Art (to give it a term which relates the endeavor to say Pound's "Cantos", Stein's "Stanzas in Meditation", Ives' symphonies, etc., the collage, Charles Olson and so forth); and the bulk of "Scenes From Under Childhood", "The Weir-Falcon Saga", "The Machine of Eden", "The Animals of Eden and After" have all increasingly reflected this consideration. The three Pittsburgh films are the most obvious recent flowering of some sense about Document which excludes the "ary" usually tacked onto film examples of such. [January 6, 1972]

As has been noted, Brakhage's concerns were not only with the traditional documentary film but with the documentary aspects of other film forms.

> Okay, I think the board of directors of Anthology Film Archives

> are 'tabling' a lot of works recently made, notably Ernie Gehr's, Andrew Norin's [sic], Frampton's recent films and mine, along with Ricky Leacock's, etc., because you never DID get an historical fix on Document which was worth a damn. You're losing the drift, one of the most exciting filmmaking drifts of the moment, and one of the most traditional American drifts from the very beginning.

Brakhage's engagement with Document was far from over. He proclaimed to Mekas that he had decided to focus on Document in a lecture series for his students at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago.

> Within a year, I hope to do a series on Document from The Lumiére Bros. right straight thru to your Diaries. I am working on it now.

He also planned to take on the film community, with its expectations of what a Brakhage film must be.

> Those are my OLD films you have in Anthology. I've moved on. [...] I want to lecture about The Document In Art at the one or two Elgin shows; and I want specifically to attack the short-comings of criticism [...] at the Millennium show (to keep it 'in the family'[...]).

For the most part, Brakhage had not received written replies to the Document letters he had sent out. Hollis Frampton, however, had replied with an account of his own engagement and struggle with issues of Document, and had sent along an essay he was writing on a retrospective of the photographer Paul Strand, as well as his personal, somewhat jaded, opinion of the state of documentary film. When Broughton responded, it was with heartfelt gestures of support but without addressing the issue of Document. Brakhage's reply to Broughton provided a telling view of his expectations of the Document correspondence.

> Thank you for your encouraging letter, your two letters. I am feeling very much 'on top' of the problematical notions of several weeks

> back. It's helped me very much to write those several letters apropo 'Document.' I don't think such writing will have much continuity. It was a reversion to ye olde Brakhage. And then, too, nobody seems to have 'picked up' meaningfully on the subject. That's OK. That great urge of American letter-writing may be over—"killed by the telephone" as Ed Dorn puts it. But it helped me to write TO several friends midst this matter, this what's-the-matter! A bit coyote-like I howl across mountains, eyes on the moon and/or the heavens. [December 20, 1971]

Brakhage's interest in the aspects of Document in his own work, however, was once again to undergo a change. This change, a move toward the documentation of his own life, would reflect the new level of an interest he described as "re-awakening" in his own "environs," as well as the compelling discoveries he was making in a book about his favorite poet by a literary critic for whom he had great respect. In the late winter and early spring months of 1972, Stan Brakhage was to read voraciously, several times over, Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (1971).

While *The Pound Era* is an impressive work of literary scholarship whatever the context, it was a particularly significant book to a man who was himself aware and proud of working in the tradition of continuity art; who was an avid, life-long reader and admirer of Pound's poetry; and who was experiencing extensive, fundamental, and continuing change in his own work. Brakhage's transition, like Pound's, was a torturous struggle of moving from an easily acquired and highly admired youthful style to a style that essentially repudiated key aspects of the most renowned earlier work. Pound and Brakhage both had moved away from the accepted and acclaimed to styles that could be mistaken as styleless. They both had been held to account for what had been perceived, by critics of their work, as unfortunate appropriations from other traditions that they had only partially comprehended. They had both begun to apply disciplines that were neither recognized nor understood, and moved into areas of their arts that had not yet been explored.

Brakhage began his transition well before he happened upon *The Pound Era.* A move toward greater simplicity and directness began in his work as early as the latter sections of *Scenes from Under Child-*

hood. The Pound Era provided, rather, a re-confirmation and a deepening understanding of principles that Brakhage had gleaned from decades of reading Pound's poetry itself.

Brakhage's Document letter to Robert Creeley in November 1971 had stated quite categorically the importance of Document in Pound's *Cantos* to his conception of his own Document project. Brakhage's primary take on the *Cantos* in that letter had been to question the need for the predominance of the poet's presence in the work, although the importance of Pound's degree of engagement with the world had nevertheless remained unquestioned. Six weeks later, having completed the "Pittsburgh Trilogy," Brakhage wrote to Creeley once again, clearly still keenly involved in questions of Document and still interested in Creeley's views on the matter.

> 'Document', I said, taking two steps at a time [to his upstairs editing room]. And here I am and don't know what further to say, what else there IS to say. The start is always seeming to be "out there", as you put it. Of course it isn't ; but the point is it pretends to be.
>
> I did recently get this quote from [D. W. Griffith]: 'What I really want to do is make you see.' I'm paraphrasing; but that's the gist of it. The trouble with it is the word 'make', dramatist's inevitable downfall. [January 7, 1972]

In a lecture/screening at Hunter College in March of 1972, Hollis Frampton presented a view of Document that reflected the thinking that he and Brakhage had come to through the frequent letters, phone calls, and meetings that had followed Brakhage's first letter to him in late November. Their shared antipathy toward documentary film's propagandistic tendencies was foremost in the minds of both artists.

> The notion of document is central to the understanding of much current film art.
>
> I am not referring to what has been called "documentary", for that has largely degenerated into propagandist movie-making, decorated with tinges of pre-digested "realism" (whatever that is). When Robert Flaherty began, in Louisiana Story, to use actors and multiple takes, the hand-writing was on the wall: a film genre molded by Flaherty, Paul Strand, Pare Lorentz and others into

> kindly (socialist?) Old Doc, has eventually revealed its true face, that of Papa Doc. In a word, documentARY is always careful to tell us HOW TO FEEL about what we see.
>
> Such aesthetic coercion is foreign to document, which reposes complete faith in the perfect fullness and sufficiency of the unrehearsed film image itself.[5]

Only days after that lecture, Brakhage wrote one final Document letter to Frampton, in which he quoted freely from the book he had been reading and re-reading. Across the top of the typed letter in an exuberant hand he wrote: "Praise be 'The Pound Era' by Hugh Kenner!" He eagerly shared his discoveries with his correspondent.

> First let me send you some quotes from a book I'm sure you're already reading—these but to define peripheries of my consideration apropo "Document" as of these last six months...these 'stakes', then as I am moving ON (the word "document" entering my greeninghouse these days as difficultly as a grand piano.) My attack on "documentary": (the damnability of that term clogging all our thought) best clarion-fied via Henry James' definition of the word in his use of its thus: "an impression...so documentary, as to the capacity of the American public for momentary gregarious emphasis, that I regret having to omit here all the reflection it prompted." He was referring ("The American Scene") to a football game ("momentary gregarious emphasis"); but you don't really need that on the "stake."
>
> The second quote I now know by hand's heart, Fenollosa's: "Things are cross-sections cut through actions, snapshot." This is the definition I was scratching after in my first letter on the relation between "document" and photography. Thank you, Hugh Kenner. Later in "The Pound Era" Hugh sorts this def. out in specific relation to motion picture photography; but I of course came immediately to that consideration via Williams' "No ideas but in things" which has shaped all filmy thought since it prompted my "Songs." [March 28, 1972]

Brakhage's determination to move "ON" must be understood to comprehend what had gone before, but also to indicate a different working direction.

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[5] Hollis Frampton, "Some Film Documents: Notes for a screening on 3/23/72 at Hunter College" (included in the Brakhage archive).

> I would rather triangulate this 'field' (as it is, anyway, a path) with the quote that most moves me off into the wilderness of current working (that quote which has often moved me before, but now re-energized by Mr. Kenner), Pound's Kung [...] "Sincerity." The precise definition of the word, pictorially the sun's lance coming to rest on the precise spot...; and we can perhaps delete "verbally" to leave it open for filmmaker considerations. I'm re-reading that chapter ("Inventing Confucius") every other day. [...] And of course I'm reading "The Cantos" daily again—had been at 'em anyway this whole last year (after several years of avoidance.) Anyway, this quote picks up the threads of LIGHT shot thru all my correspondence on "document".

The direction is into autobiography, not coincidentally the direction, as so beautifully explicated by Kenner, of Pound's life work—the *Cantos*.

> I am contemplating an autobiography called: "Sincerity". The possibilities of half-a-doz. other LIGHT films dance in, yes, the Kenner-quickened air...(it is so simple a thing as good conversation: I do converse with books here in these lonely mountains, take 'em to my bar, buy 'em a drink, drink both myself).
>
> I have at least a year's work and can there be any greater blessing?...

Brakhage at this point seemed particularly eager to leave his "theoretical" wrestling with Document in film behind, as he stepped forward to start on his "Autobiography."

> If there's anything more to be said on "Document" for awhile it'll be up to you. My worst fear at the moment is that everyone I wrote apropo 'ol' Doc' will finally entertain my questions, echo the rhetoric of those earlier letters, and thus pull on me to answer them further on the subject. As my eyes swim in the light again, it gets difficult for me to read.[...]
>
> Well, Hollis, that old ARY ball is all yours, if you like; and please do write whatever mentaries come to mind. Just don't ex-

> pect me to catch a pass. I'm side-lined, got 'bad eyes' (as they always said), shifty etcetera.

Brakhage was emboldened enough by his enthusiasm about *The Pound Era* to write to Hugh Kenner himself. With his letter, he included two of the letters he had written in his Document correspondence.

> I was given your address years ago by Guy Davenport. I never had occasion to write in that meantime; but now I want to thank you for "The Pound Era". [...] I thought you might enjoy these overheard conversations [...] especially that (letter to Hollis) in praise of your magnificent book. [March 28, 1972]

In 1973, Brakhage was to release his film *Sincerity. Sincerity* would become the first in a complex series of nine films that would engage his attention until the end of the decade. This project would challenge Brakhage's command of Document in unprecedented ways, many times over, as he attempted to portray his own life, and thus necessarily the life of his family, on film. The *Sincerity/Duplicity* series would be followed in 1984 by the related single-film work, *Tortured Dust.* Brakhage declared these two works, along with the earlier *Scenes From Under Childhood* and *The Weir Falcon Saga,* to constitute, together, a single autobiographical film cycle. This major work, 17 films in length, he has entitled *The Book of the Family.*

During the mid-1980s, Brakhage became increasingly intrigued with the possibilities of hand painting on film. Since that time, he has worked only rarely in Document.

GUY DAVENPORT

Brakhage's Songs (1966)

Cinematography is still so young that a ten-year-old boy who went to the first movie of them all, Louis and Auguste Lumière's film of unrelated, everyday scenes, would now be only eighty, and might conceivably have seen all the movies ever made. It is not, then, either coincidence or design that the first film found subjects that the most seeing of eyes—Stan Brakhage's—are still inspecting. Lumière's three subjects were "Feeding the Baby" (Brakhage's *Song 11*), "The Card Party" (*Song 19*), and "The Arrival of the Train at the Station" (*Song 13*). An earlier Lumière, in fact the very first to be made, shows his employees leaving the factory, a milling of people kin to Brakhage's *Song 12*, the movements of people at an airport. By 1896, a matter of weeks after the December première of these films that merely watched the world, the public could see a gardener placidly watering his flowerbed. A neighbor comes to kibitz, and naturally stands on the hose, which goes dry. The gardener peers into the nozzle. The neighbor steps off the hose. Spurt. Dance of indignation.

Brakhage deliberately went back to the first Lumière, and is still not satisfied that he has exhausted, or ever will exhaust, the potential implicit in that arrangement of world and camera. When Brakhage comes to photograph the train, he is in another train, moving in the opposite direction. He is aware that the other train is doing what the shutter of his camera is doing, and what the gate of the projector will do afterwards: it is slicing up the strong landscape beyond into intermittent bits. He is also aware that he is photographing his own reflection, the only still thing in a film so busy of movement that the audience feels the same dismay as Lumière's when it shifted nervously as the train it watched kept chugging toward them. Brakhage is photographing a scene most of us choose not to experience; there is something disturbing in the movement of trains witnessed in a moving (or still) train. Once we are past childhood, we prefer to stare at our stable shoes until we can see a less dizzying movement.

We are content to call the first non-dramatic films "studies." From Muybridge's first analysis of motion onto six, twelve, and even twenty-four plates to the action clips of Donisthorpe and Skladanowsky, the camera was, as Cocteau noticed, a cow's eye. The newsreel and the scientific film have been allowed to look with a cow's eye (or eagle's, or lynx's) but the film has otherwise spent its sixty-eight years watching the gardener's face when his hose went dry.

Once Brakhage had made *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) he had discovered that the camera had developed strenuously but one of the modes latent in the simple fact that it was an eye that could share its sight with any other eye. Brakhage's eye had learned, is still learning, to see in what may prove to be as many modes as physiology and spirit allow—which sounds fatuous until we realize that every eye is pattern-bound in what it sees at all, and beyond that severe limitation is unskilled, stupid of movement, dull, blind in a very real sense. The arts have always taught us to see; for the first time in the history of the world a generation has grown up aware that it can see a figure in dim light as Rembrandt and the autumn trees as Jackson Pollock, or the other way round. The eye's intelligence must be learned.

A year and a half ago, having finished his first masterpiece, *Dog Star Man*, after some forty films all distinguished in one way or another and all pushing outward the possibilities for seeing that *Anticipation* began, Brakhage turned to a series of songs, as he called them, in 8 millimeter, short studies only a few minutes long.

The *Songs* began as a pause. *Dog Star Man* had folded out into *The Art of Vision*. Brakhage had turned to the short film, to *Pasht*, the contemplative act of a cat washing itself. As the art of the century goes monstrous, Brakhage moves inward, into silence, into the small gestures, the essential quiet (a Galapagos turtle walking high up in the water, a bug on linoleum, children).

Inspired by books of poetry, meant to be returned to, shown to friends, commented on (their silence invites talk), collected, they are definitely home movies—in a double sense: Brakhage frequently enlists the preoccupations of the amateur photographer, taking as prime source (like Picasso, like Bonnard) the utterly familiar; and the *Songs* are not meant to brave the public, who have just left TV and are out to have their sensibilities soothed rather than wakened.

Thus far the *Songs* number twenty-two. At twenty-three they will begin to branch (the structure is to suggest a tree); the "Twenty-Third Psalm Branch" will have multiple parts, like *15*, which is as long as the rest of the *Songs* together. After that, leaf songs, flower songs. Perhaps.

SONG 1: Portrait of a woman reading. Her hands are occupied with beads. The serenity of the woman happens within the serenity of a room, of a quiet house. Transparencies flow throughout: Brakhage's signature window and door (through which people, the wash on the line, snow, trees)—the window that was as terrible as an image in Poe in *Wedlock House* and as the one pervasive American symbol of loneliness in *Anticipation of the Night*, Hopper's blank windows, the House of Usher's windows, the windows that have turned up in American painting from 1910 forward. In *Song 1* the window is lyric, sweet, transparent. The song ends with one of those heaps of things the Brakhages build and call angels, presences made of boughs, curtains, pillows, hats, whatever. *Song 1* is Turkish, a Matisse, a Vuillard, but thoroughly American. Gertrude Stein would have liked it, would have accurately identified it as a landscape with saint. A large eye frequently fills the screen, an overply, the flesh window.

SONG 2: Wind and dust. Heat shimmers the image, and heat on the horizon burns. The camera swings, surges. The land outside the window.

SONG 3: The river's water. As wet as *Song 2* was dry. Water surfaces. Brakhage's favorite colors: Coca-Cola and lime. Brief cityscapes (the street as river, traffic its flow); water-green film on which nothing at all has been photographed, for sheer continuity of water's sameness. Water is one of Brakhage's verbs. *Songs 2* and *3* are stark, severe, living in the warmth and richness of *Song 1*.

SONG 4: Two strong stanzas: children playing (a dream of Lewis Carroll's, red dresses, a red ball, all against green lawn, and in slow motion, a ballet, an evocation of innocence) and an abstract sequence, every frame an illumination that out-Pollocks Pollock, and all painted over the Denver of Brakhage's childhood: an automatic, automobilistic world, heavy with nostalgia but idiotically busy in contrast to the dance of the girls.

SONG 5: Childbirth. Here Brakhage begins the use of a grain as obvious as in Seurat, an atomic light in greens and blues. The birth is ad verbum, medically exact, photographed with the care of a naturalist. Wild swings of the camera suggest the child's astonished look at the world. Ends with happy fatigue, faces happy and smiling. Brakhage's piety before childbirth is Eleusinian, deeply respectful of the spiritual and biological content of the moment, both disarmingly literal and as religious as an eighth-century Cretan (whose belief would have been touched by neither sentimentality nor doubt) pouring the barley for his god.

SONG 6: Trompe d'oeil. What looks like a flower forest of Rousseau's is a nice vulgar expanse of Sears Roebuck linoleum, across which a bug makes his way, as important as an eosaurus traversing Yucatan.

SONG 7: San Francisco and the Pacific. Cubist, sliding facets. For Brakhage a façade is just that: a stage set. The sea is folded in with the fronts of buildings, a Baroque-rhythmed inter-sheaving of colored surfaces. Only the windows speak, burn with western sun, flash silver light.

SONG 8: Sea animals. Fish, turtles, lobsters, eels. The sea of *Song 7* has been entered, right down to the depths. Brakhage reaches down to the elementals, where the next song will be staged in metaphor. One of the most beautiful of the songs, this.

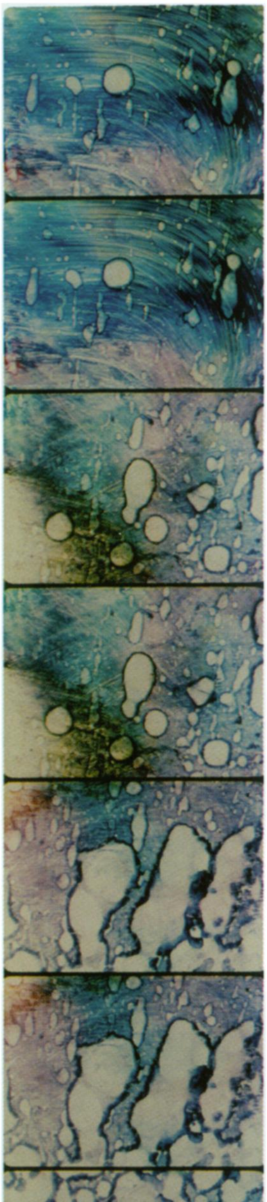
SONG 9: A comic masterpiece. Komos, the marriage festival. Three themes are laid down immediately: a pacing rhinoceros with the Brakhage window (now very much the guillotine) projected onto his hide, which is as primaeval as the deep-sea creatures in *Song 8*. Then children, nonchalantly and impudently naked, playing. Then a wedding, out of doors and at night, the participants very Middle Class, having the one daring fling of their lives: a different sort of wedding, California Druids perhaps; anyway, enthusiasts of some sort, who require the full of the moon for their nuptials. They are blue silhouettes (who but Brakhage and Al Capp, since the eighteenth century,

STAN BRAKHAGE: CORRESPONDENCES

CHICAGO REVIEW

47:4 WINTER 2001
48:1 SPRING 2002

Film strips courtesy of Stan Brakhage,
selected and scanned by Fred Camper.



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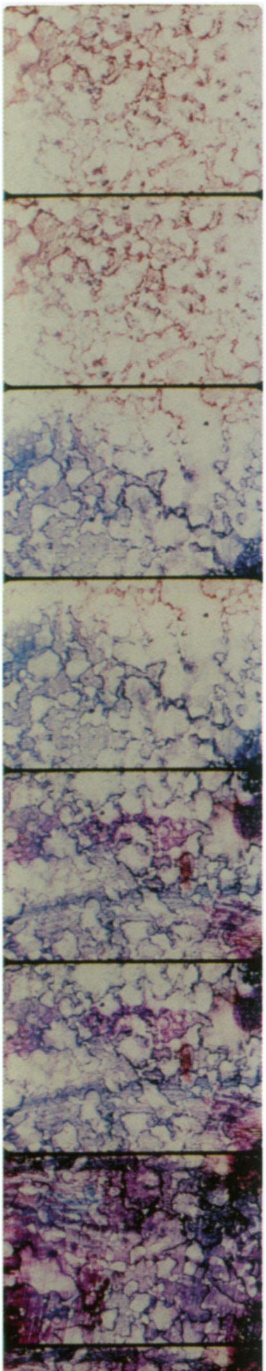

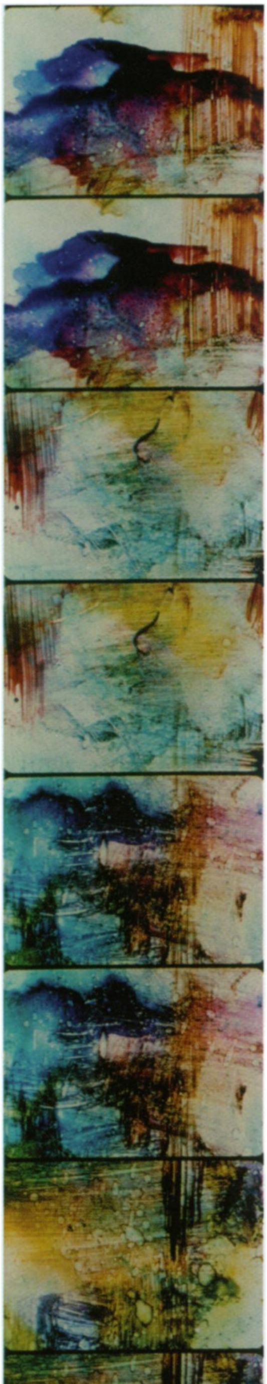

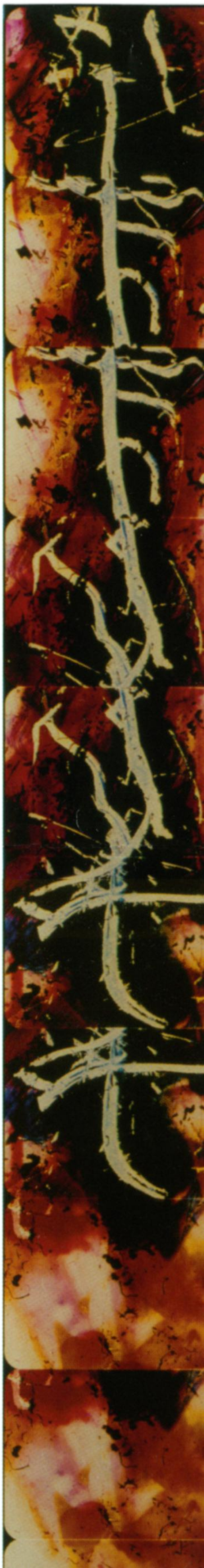

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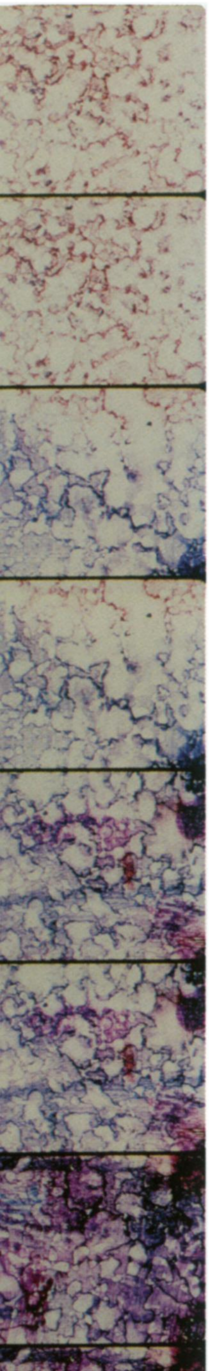
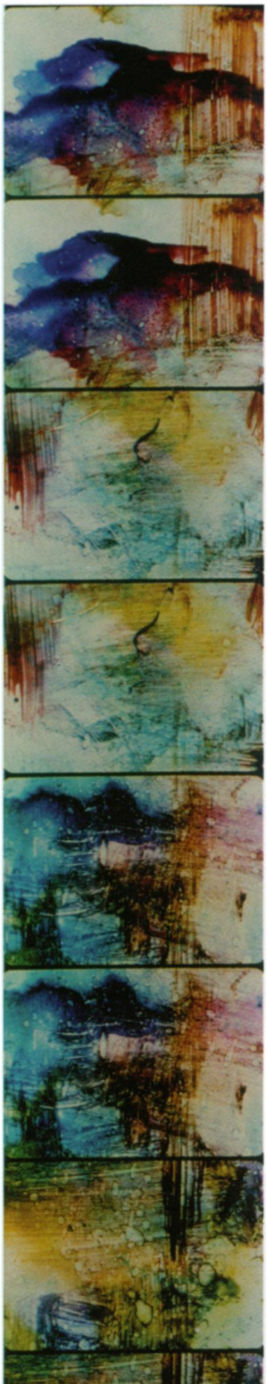
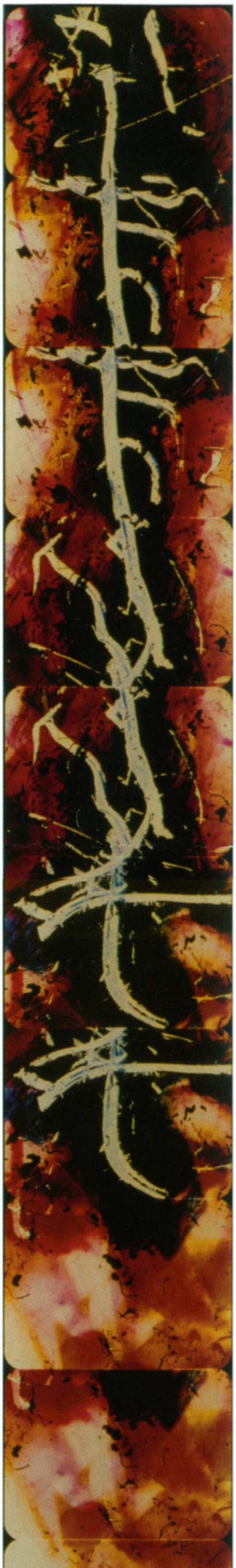
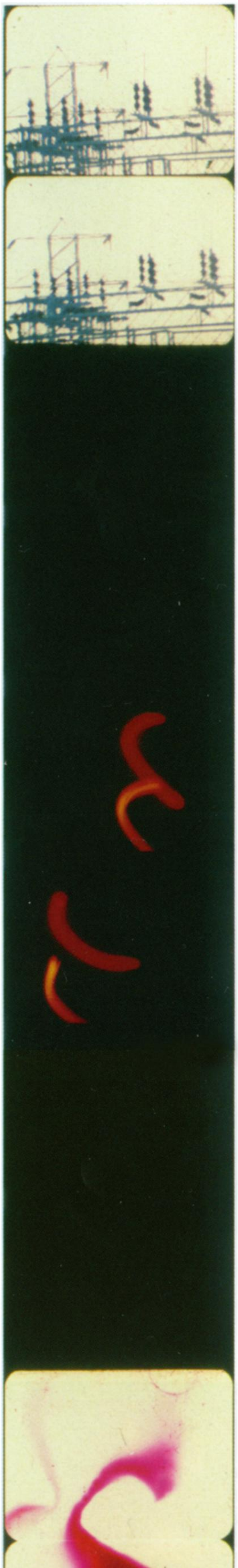
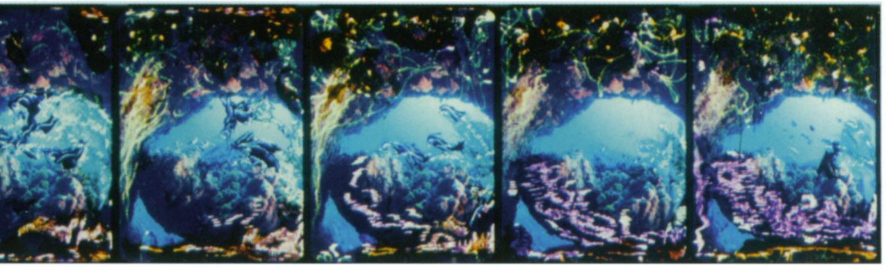


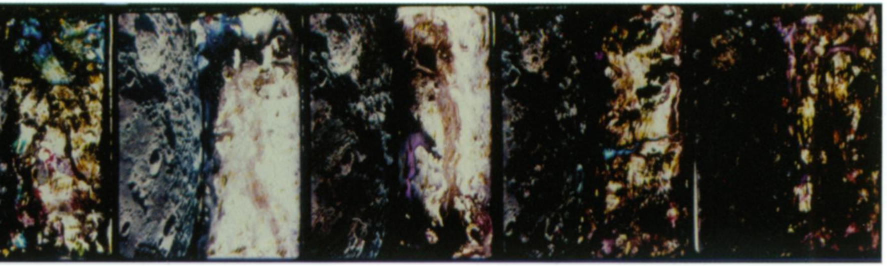


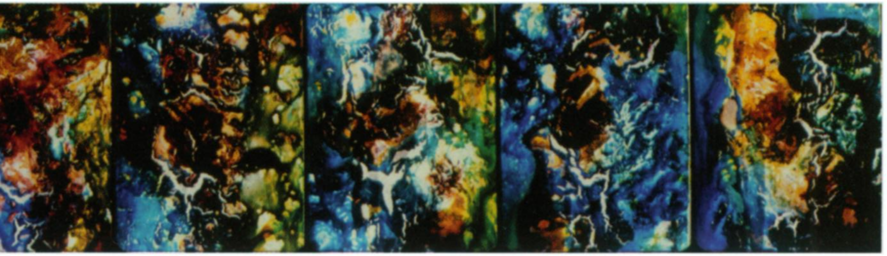


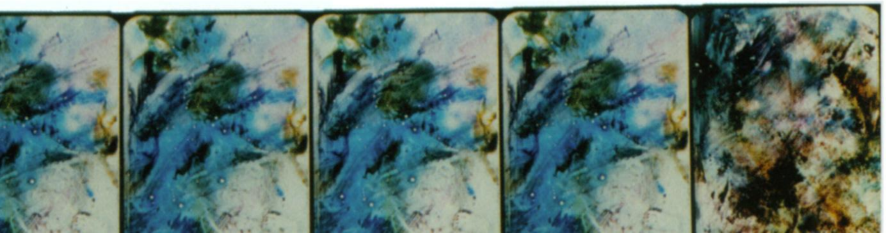
ggdrasil Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind (1997)

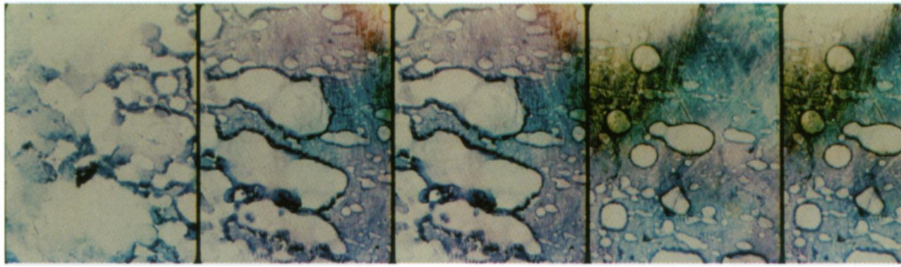




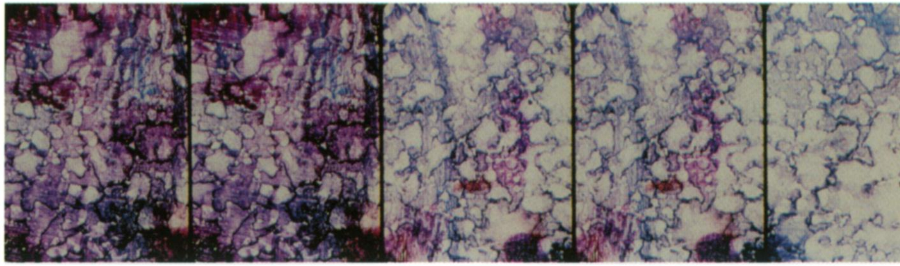








Plates 9-11. ...*Preludes* (1996)



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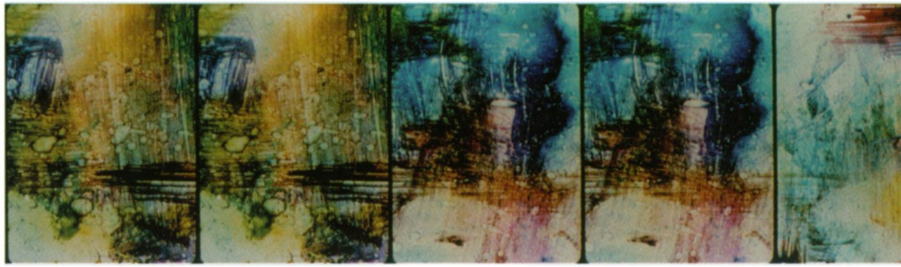

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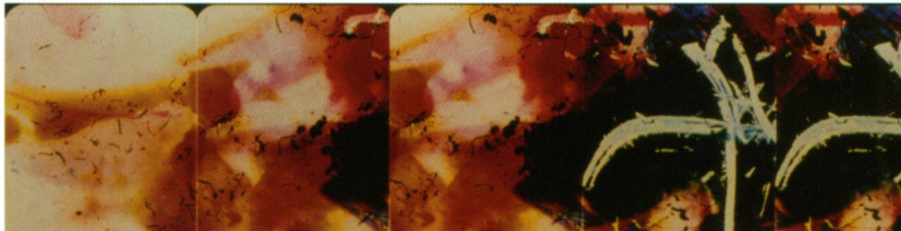

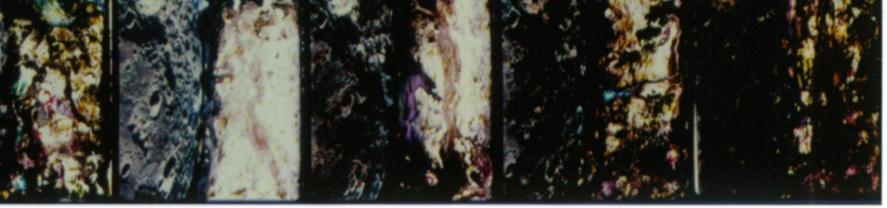

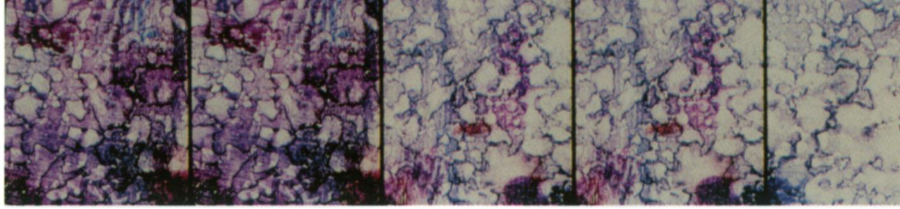

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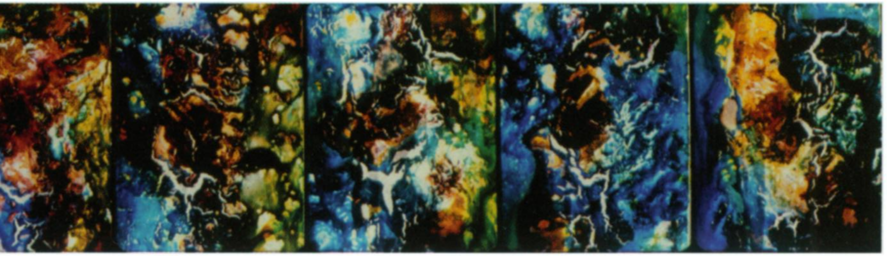

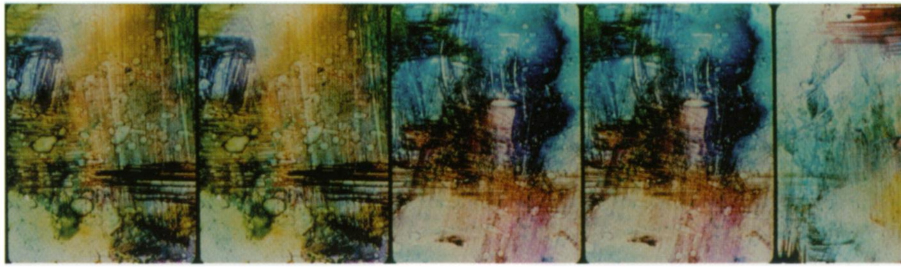

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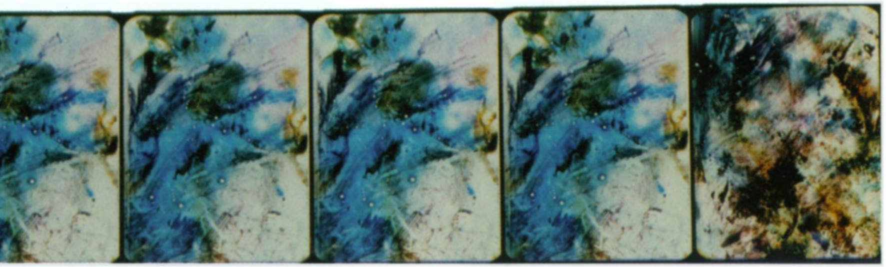
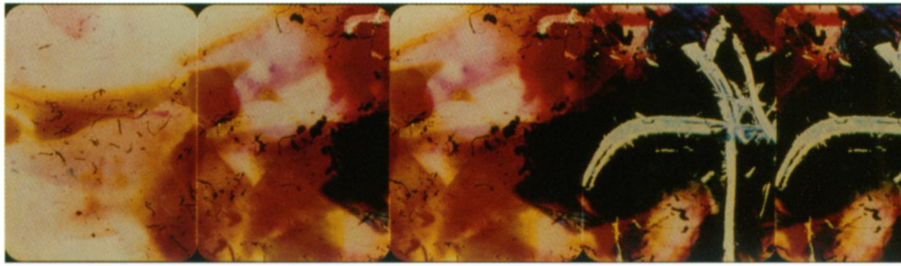
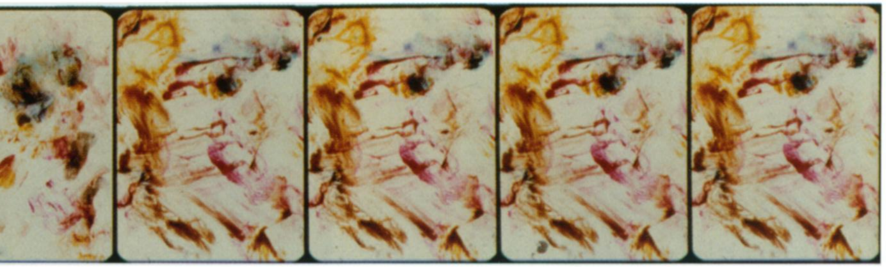
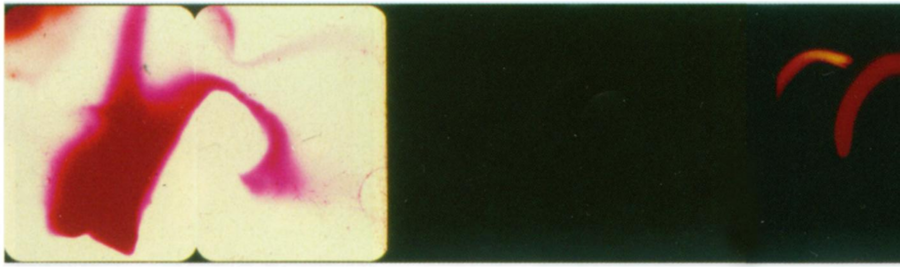




Plates 12-13. *Yggdrasil Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind* (1997)





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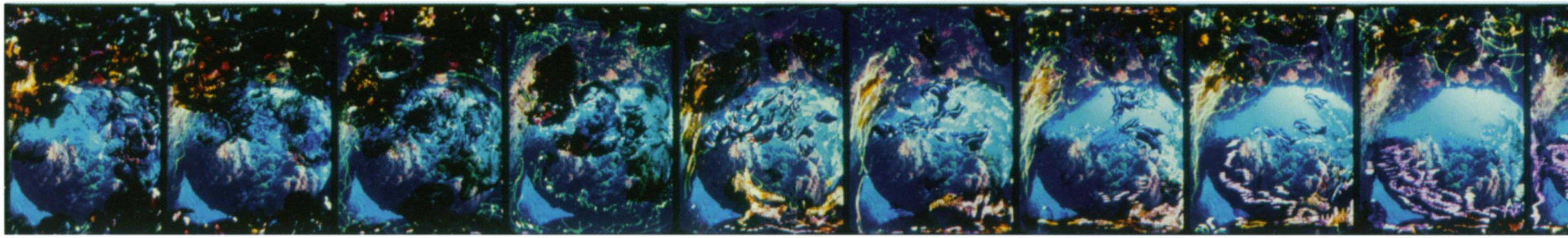
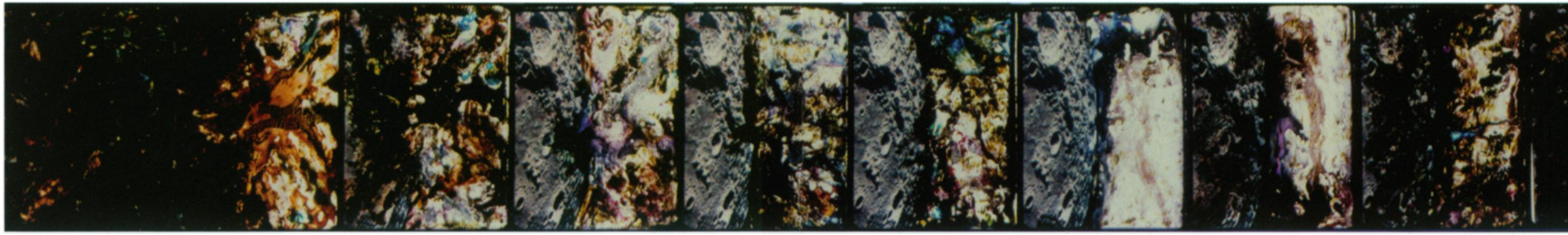


Plates 14-16. *existence is song* (1987)



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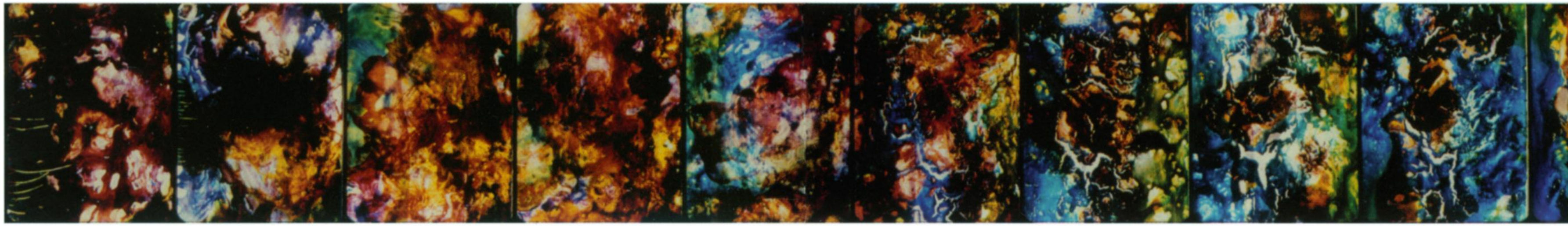

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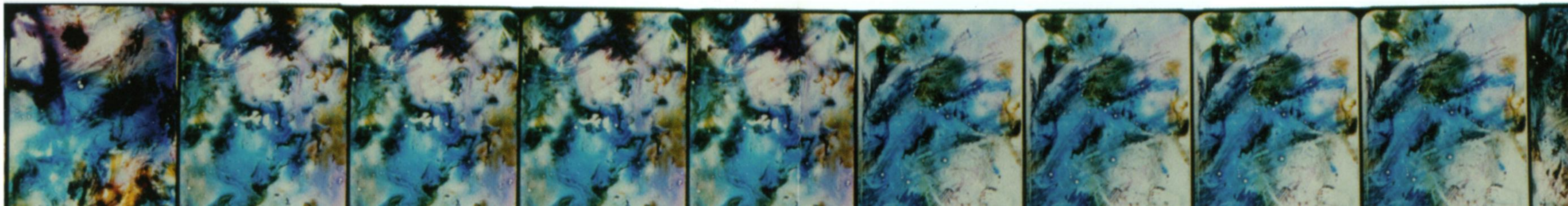

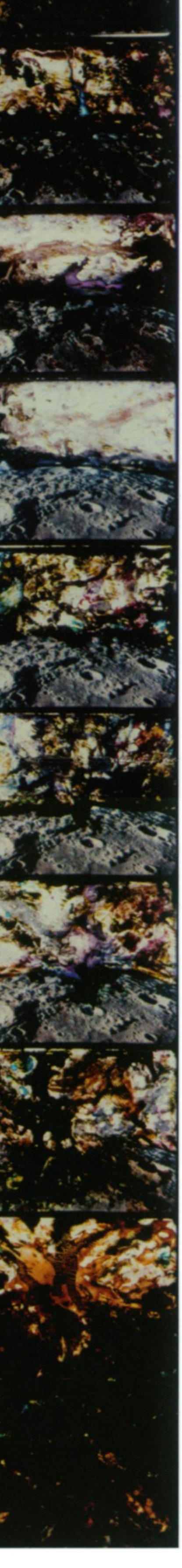

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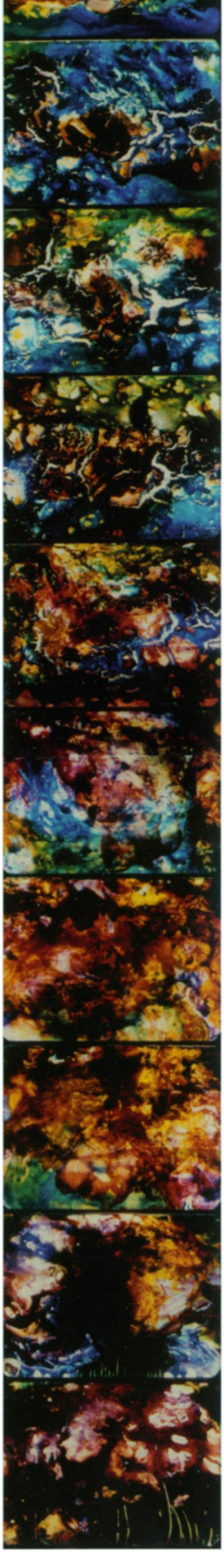

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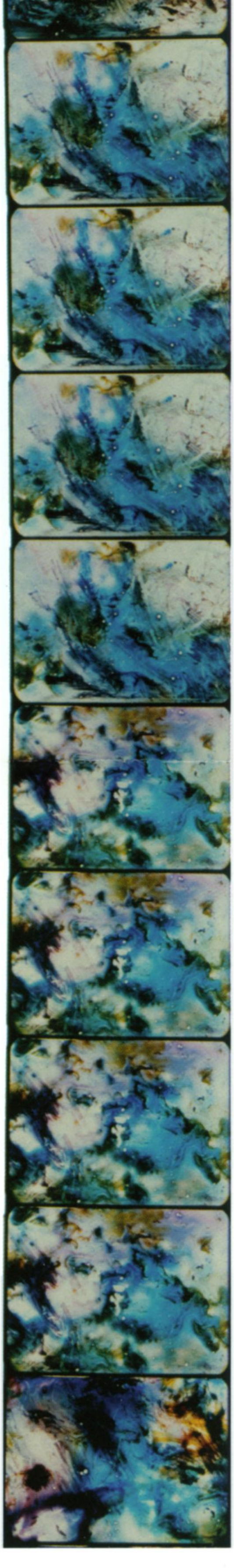
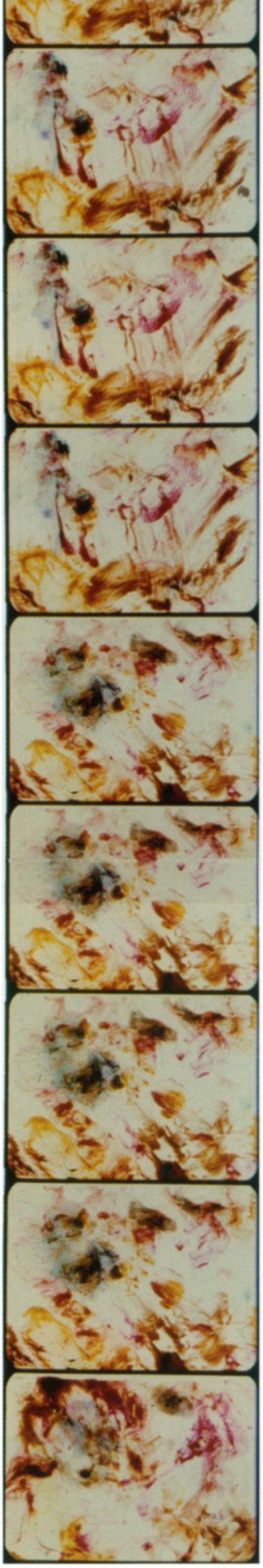


Plates 17-18. *Hell Itself* (1987)



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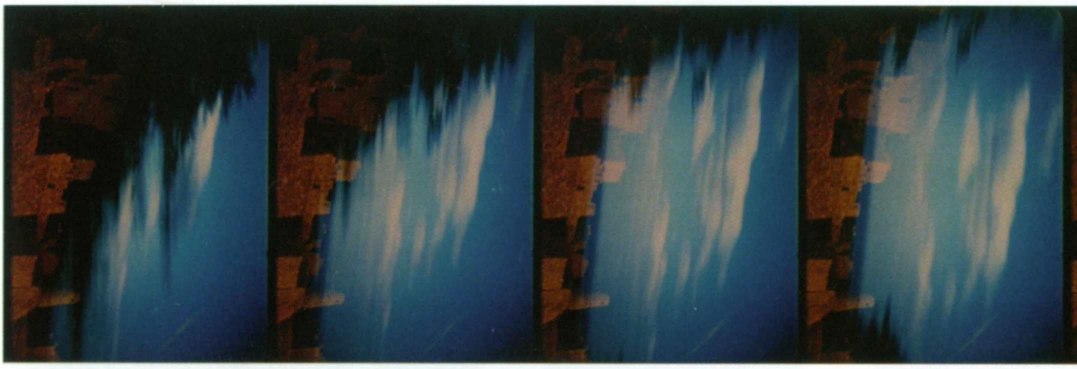


Plate 1. *Visions in Meditiation #2: Mesa Verde* (1989)

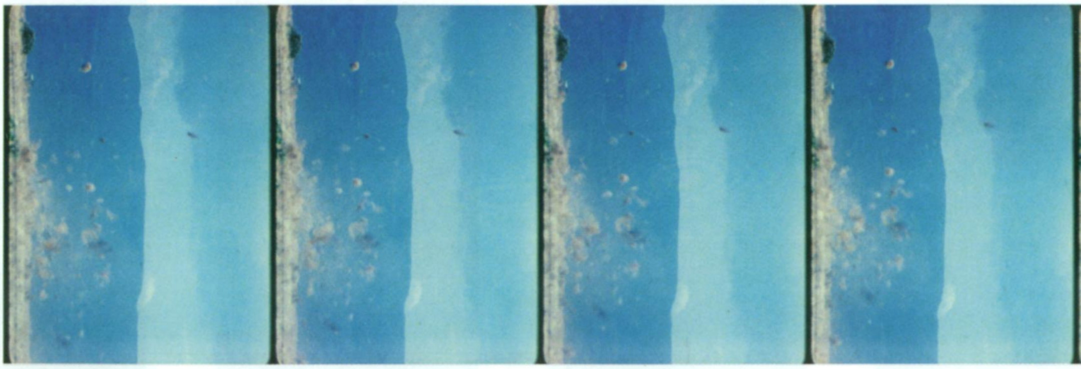
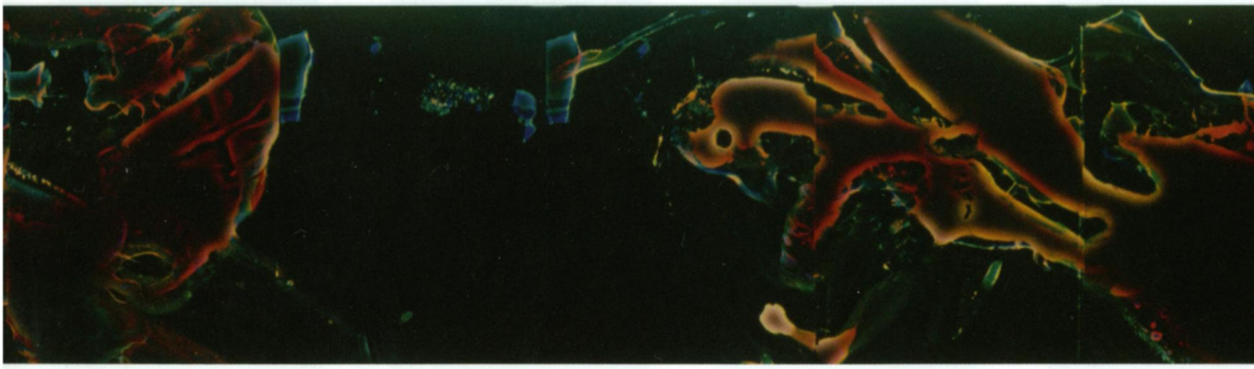
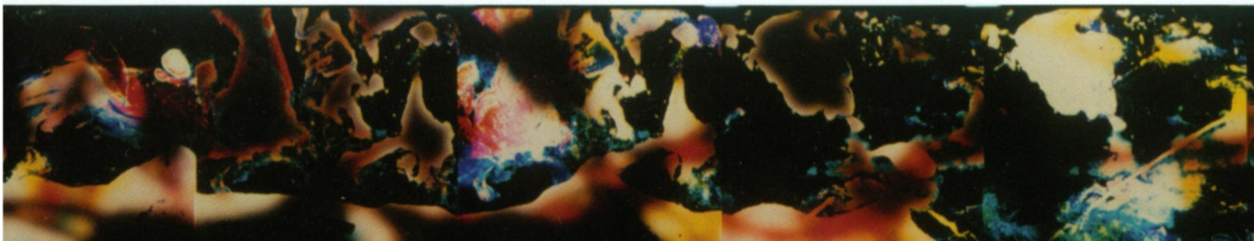
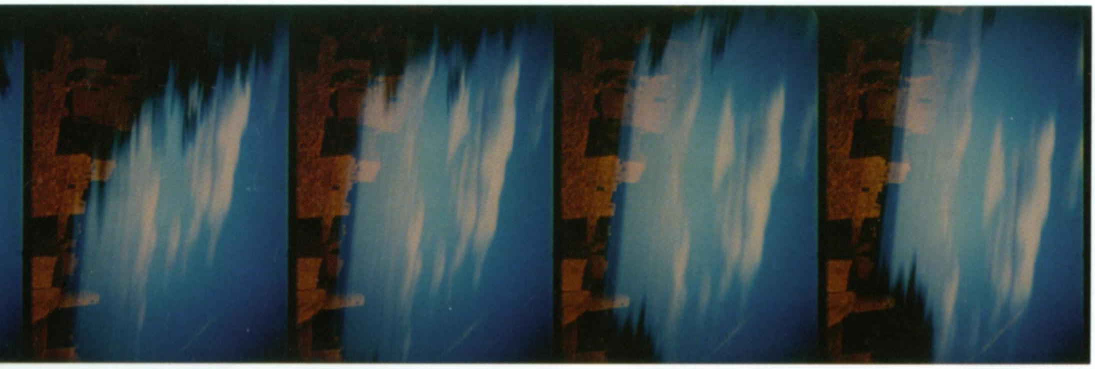


Plate 2. *Visions in Meditiation #3: Plato's Cave* (1990)



Plates 3-6. *Coupling* (1999)





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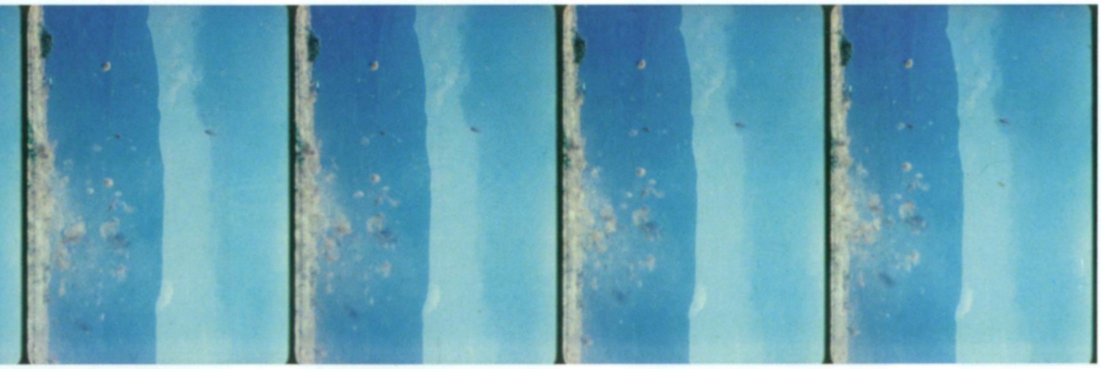

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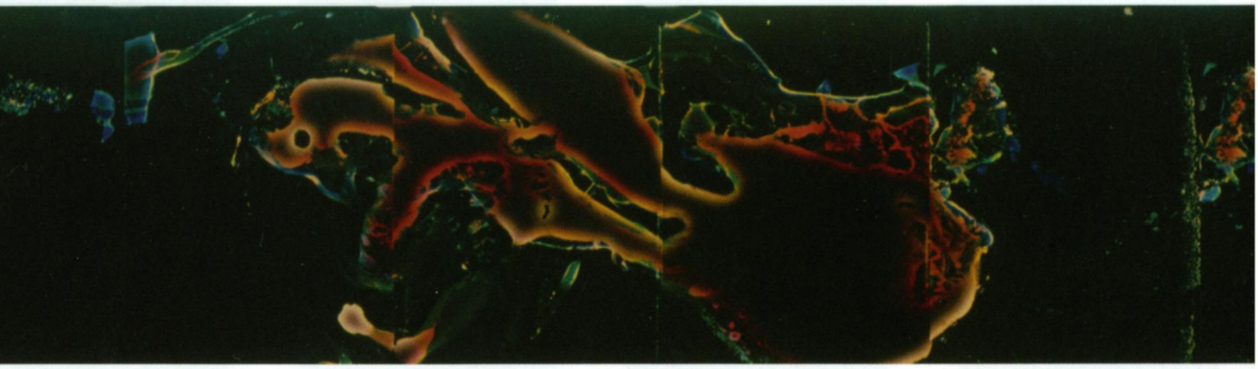

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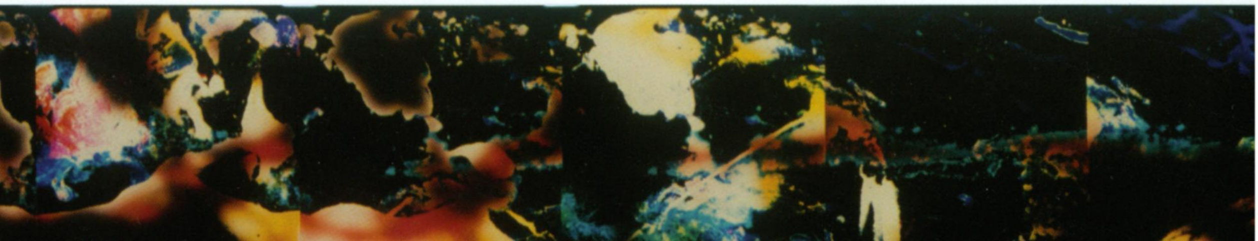
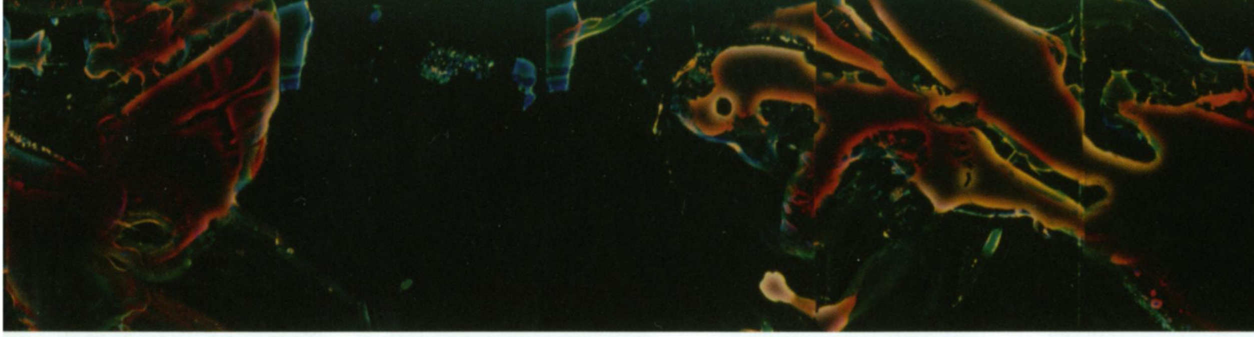
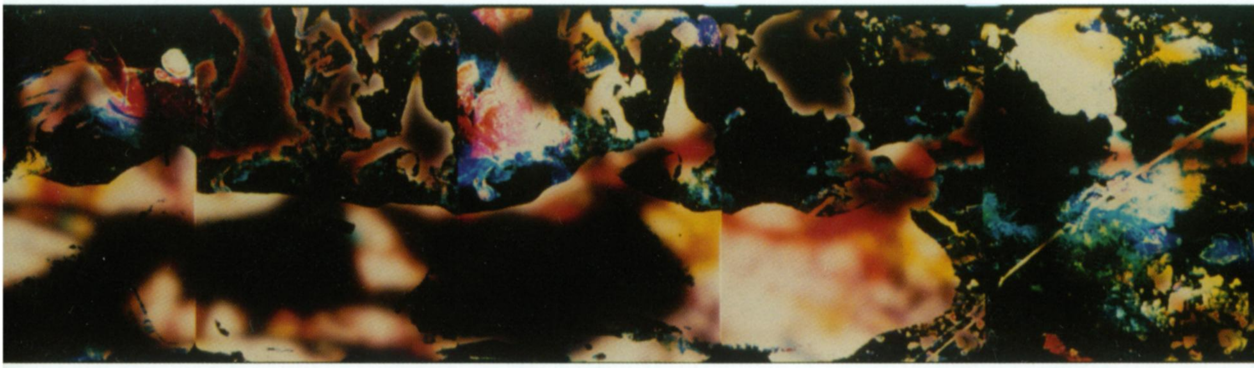




Plates 3-6. *Coupling* (1999)



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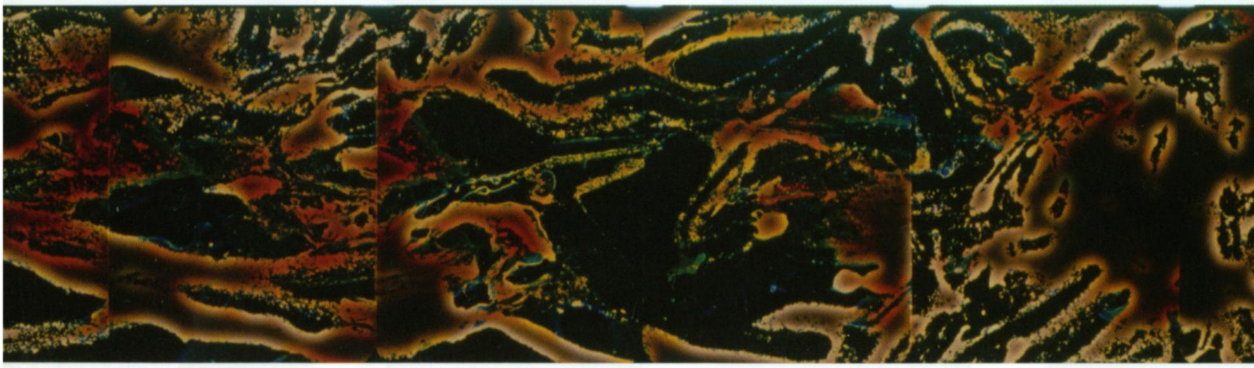

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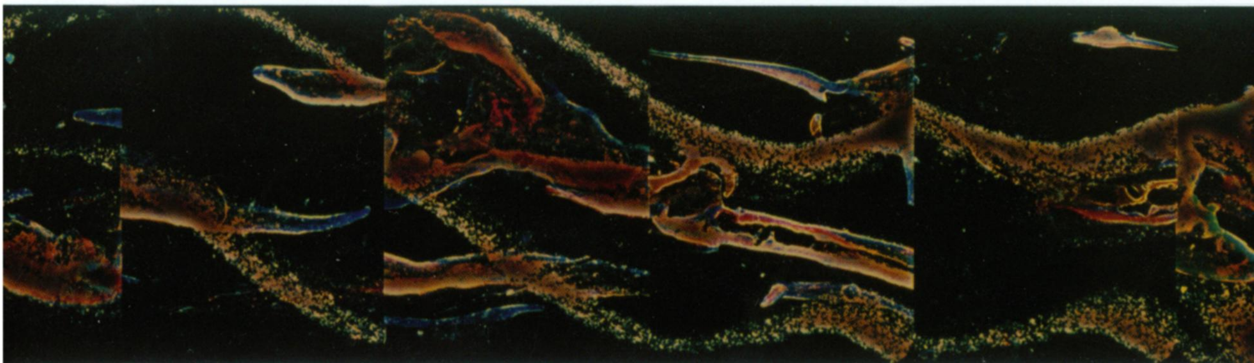

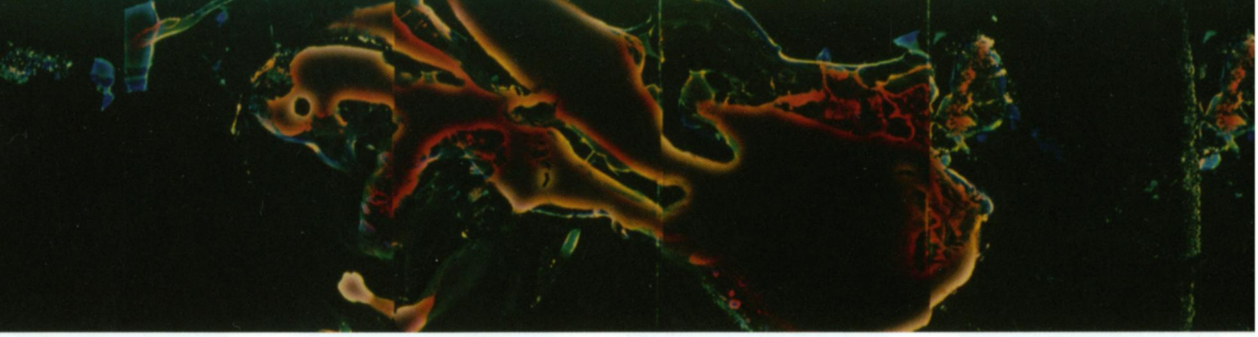

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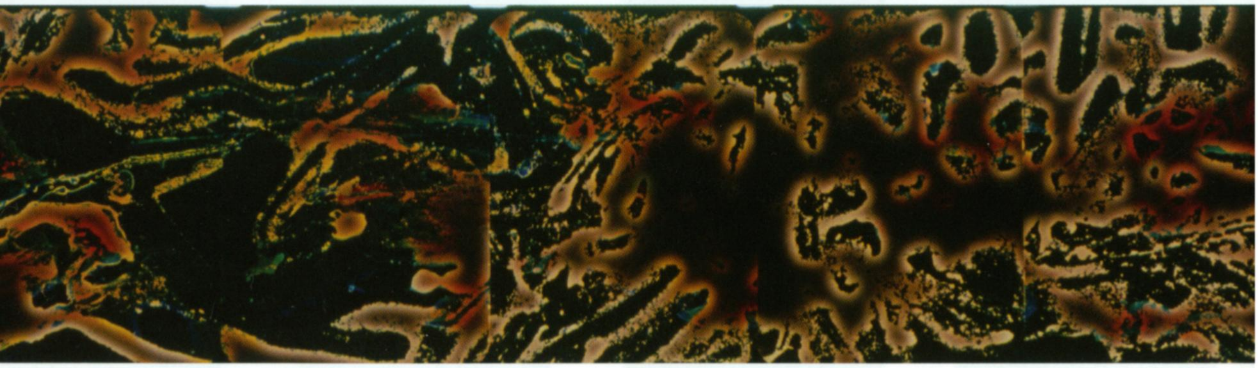

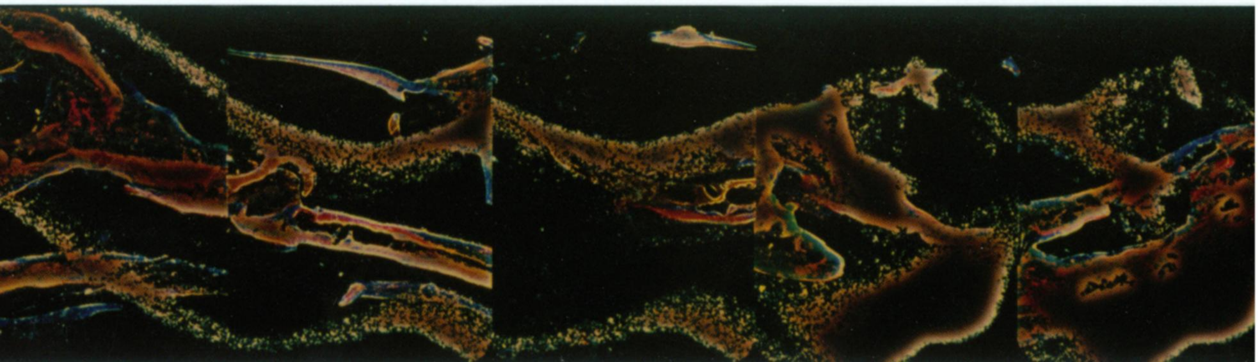

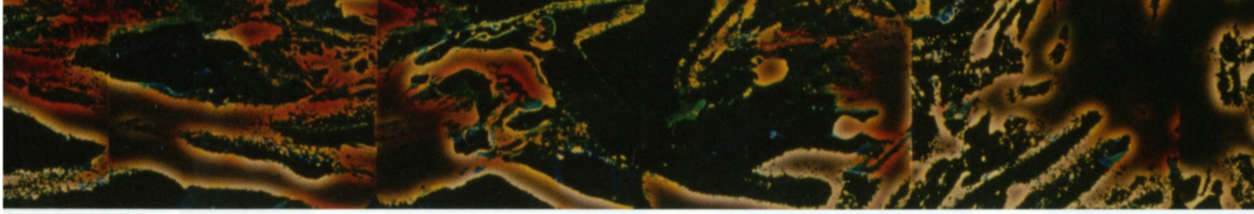

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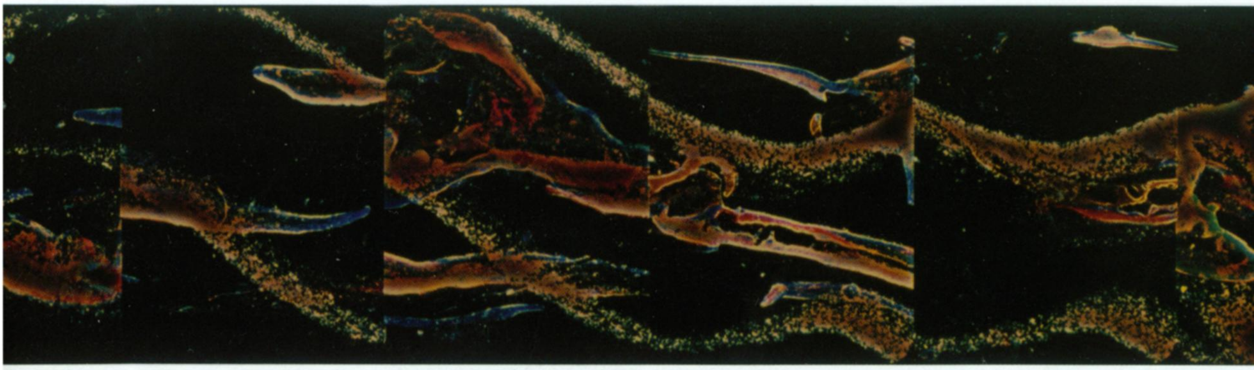

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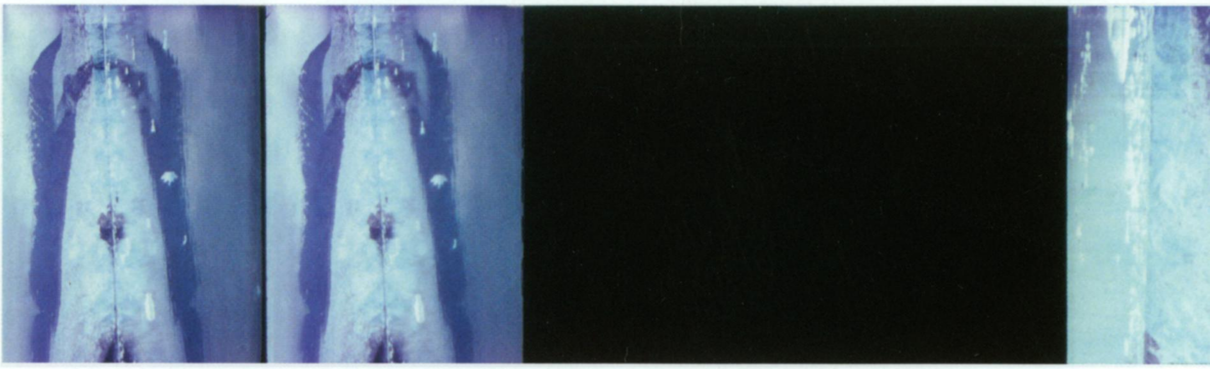


Plate 7. *Creation* (1979)

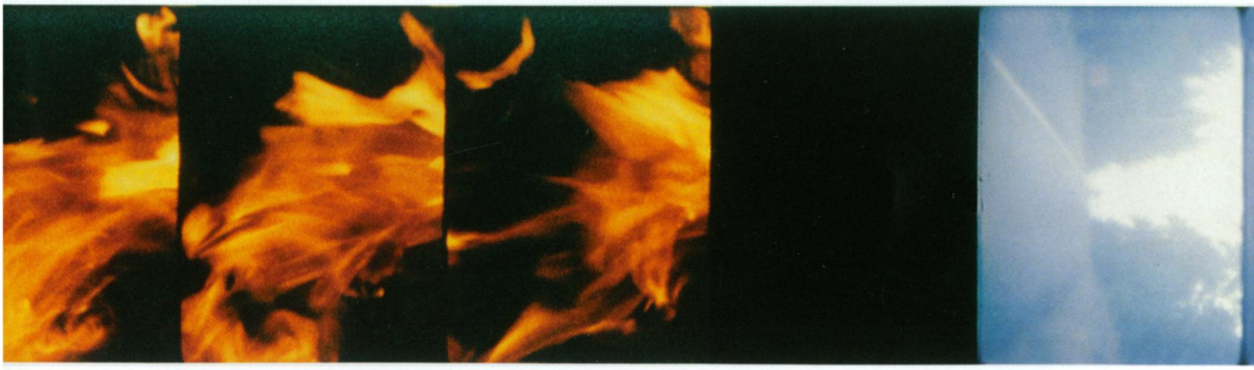
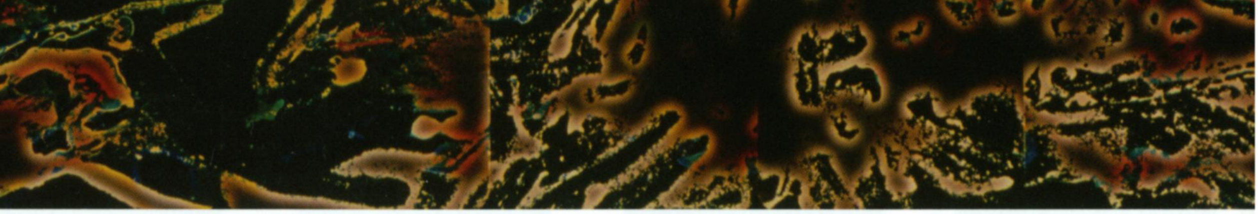
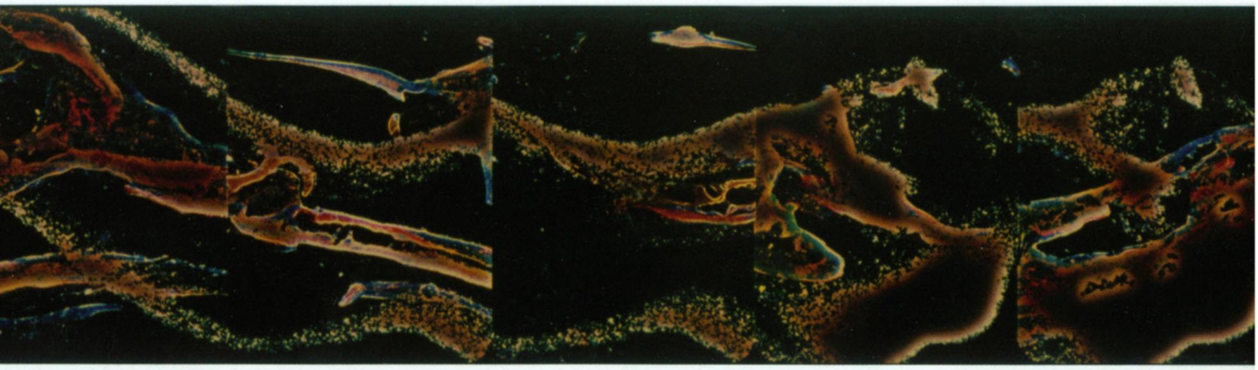
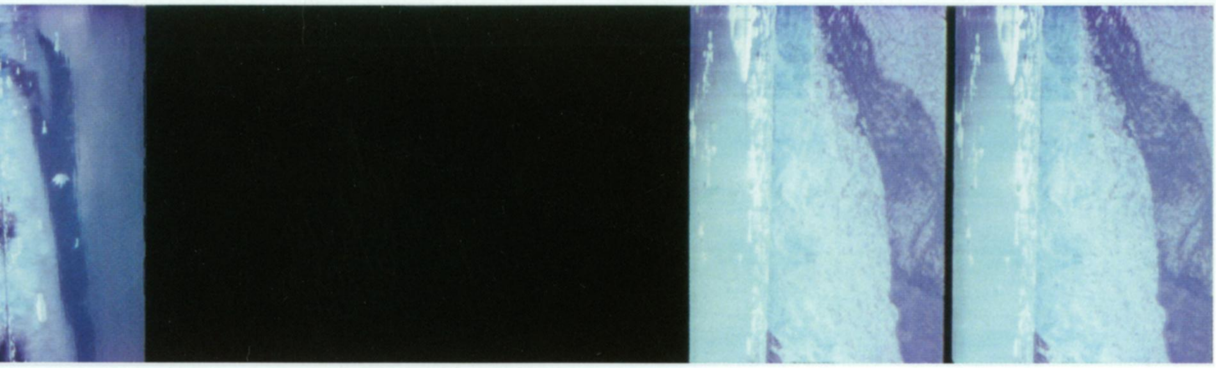


Plate 8. *The Mammals of Victoria* (1994)







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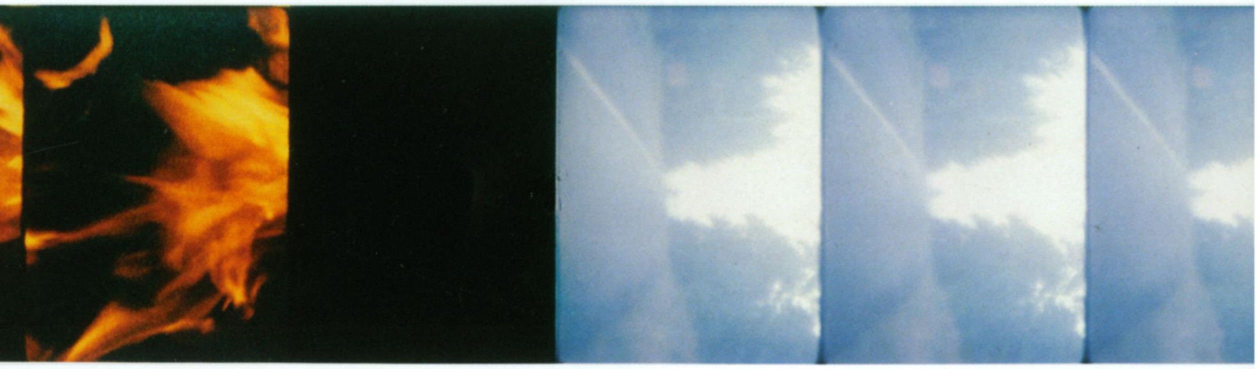

of Victoria (1994)

can use the silhouette?), puppets in some special moment that is so perilous that the honk of a horn will dispel the magic. The rhino paces, the children happily play house with some of the wittiest innuendo in the modern film. Brakhage has constructed an elaborate joke, to be read any way you will. Rhino is pure brute energy; the children, usufruct of marriage, are the kind of energy one feels the precious newlyweds never had to begin with. Nature, civilization, tentative play-acting. Reality, imagination, frivolity. Or: the wedding is Romance, and rhino and his window and the unfoolable children are what Romance is soon to collide with. Brakhage's sense of humor is the most difficult of his strategies. In an age of largely feminine humor, he remains doggedly masculine in his laughter.

SONG 10: A roomscape, from point of view of sitting photographer. The camera finds places to look, seeing the comfortable stages of a house fit to live in. The randomness gets anchored at the end by coming to the photographer's resting feet

SONG 11: The Zukofskies (for whom Brakhage is "the only one of them to look at") saw this as traffic at night. The prime source couldn't possibly be guessed (mother nursing a child); brightest highlights only are left; the film has been burnt with light, and remains a matter of fireflies.

SONG 12: The first colorless song. A study of an airport in fog, all Bauhaus lines, ghost travelers, stalking reflections. Beginning of a spy movie. The airplane is not a congenial machine to Brakhage, and its port is Martian, inhospitable, arctic.

SONG 13: Moving train photographed from a moving train, with bits of midwestern landscape discernible between the boxcars. An eye-tearing study of American motion, with the colors of the early Braque and Picasso (brown, red, blue, grey). Ends with a quiet sky of floating clouds.

SONG 14: Abstraction, but perfectly natural: mould cultures, the microscopic grain of things, a *Mothlight* that has moved onto cells—like all of Brakhage's painted frames, a fantasy of color as wild as one can imagine. Several galleries of paintings exposed sixteen to the second.

Only a man of endless energy and endless invention would risk such an effort.

SONG 15: A cycle of songs, the first branch from the main stem. Portraits of Robert Kelly, gold, brown and red; Michael McClure in black and white, with no continuity from frame to frame, like a ghost that materializes now here, now there, and speeds up to a raging flash of faces, some of which are the lion's face McClure assumes for the readings; Robert Creeley, also in black and white, and frequently in negative, an evocation of the poet's tense sincerity; the sculptor Angelo welding. The portraits are interspersed with Brakhage's wife and children, canary and dog. The sequences of Crystal weeping are eloquent; he uses the grain of the film here as the gold grain-light that dances near the first spring green of leaves, an aether that Brakhage can, through God knows what magic, make visible. The sheer passion of eye with which he has photographed Jane and the boys, Jane and Durin, Neowyn and Bear, is the stuff that separates talent from genius, del Sarto from Caravaggio. A lovesong.

SONG 16: The most beautiful of the series. Brakhage's characteristic calligraphy with the camera ceases; movements up and down, side to side give way to a pulsing movement back and forth, heartbeat and sexual thrust rather than gesture, the head alert upon the neck. Brakhage takes the fact that flowers are sexual organs and includes the human among them (as nature herself, always willing to recapitulate a design, does with Phallus Impudicus and the sea urchin). To see the course of the song as fore-play, love, orgasm is but one perception of the trope. We also move from air to under the sea, from pollen drift to the saline deep, implying pregnancy; Brakhage's moral concepts are whole. No seedtime without harvest. Color, shapes, rhythm: except for some passages in *Dog Star Man* Brakhage has never achieved such purity of form.

SONG 17: Church and cinema. Stained glass windows and screen juxtaposed, and containing the perception that drama is religion, religion, drama. The only song containing an idea, and possibly flawed thereby. A witty song, nevertheless, with an undercurrent of satire.

SONG 18: Haroun al Raschid's palace, or a plausible world of the orient. Trompe d'oeil; for what we're seeing, if you know how to look for the clues, is a gaudy dentist's office. By seeing only the decor, Brakhage neatly shows how much fantasy we only half-realize we need.

SONG 19: The twist. Girls dancing against the light, so that Brakhage sees them as possessed, witch-like, frenetic. An eery song, the eerier for being silent.

SONG 20: Chinese lakes and a diabolical light exploding: a contrast between serenity and a fierce releasing of energy—lightning, presumably, though Brakhage was photographing a laser beam twenty miles away.

SONG 21: Flowers with abstract overpainting. The patterns in the painting tend toward regularity and reticulation. For bright flower colors, the most engaging of the songs, a garden in full bloom as seen by a bee. Strong music in the colors, a hymn to Dea Flora.

SONG 22: Lights on water, the burning-sea effect of diamond light, or dancing candle-light, on water blown by soft wind. For Brakhage these lights are equally stars, dew, moonlight, sunlight, all in a Blakean harmony. A great star appears midway, with halo and points streaming from the center. To be run forward or backward, at any speed: the pattern is geometric. A frank use of natural visual magic of the sort that Brakhage usually avoids, but which he handles with a superb mastery.

The songs, thus far. They stand without impropriety beside songs made of words, especially those from which they took their impetus, the early Pound, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, and beside songs made of music. We shall all have occasion to think about them, in time; at the moment they are new, with all their secrets still inward. Their beauty, their silence, their lyric mastery keep us looking, to see.

First printed in *Film Culture* 40, 1966.

ROBERT KELLY

Notes on Brakhage

What we loved about Brakhage back then remains a permanent liberation in the medium: he broke the illusion of personed narrative.

It is not that he destroyed the line, but (like our master Kandinsky before him) moved off from the line into continents of color, geologies of mass and bodily shove.

"My violences, my violences!" The violence, of course the violence in him, studied and literary mostly, like tuneful McClure and his genial beast howls, sometimes the violence just violence, an excuse of blood, a tip of the hat to the chainsaw that seems bedded in the core of the movies. It jerks to make us see.

It makes us jerks see, we who had been put to sleep—a beautiful sleep, *bien sur*, with Harlow and Monroe and Bogart and Widmark—by svelte narration.

That unbearable episiotomy in the baby movie I hated (speaking of cores)—the occasional trace of an earlier, cheaper sense of 'drama' stands out amongst the grandeur of the rest of his work, banal rhapsody of fig-like pregnancy and blade work and spill.

So we loved him when he moved against the narrative, and counterposed (as some Blanchot might say) against old narrative a deeper, newer sense of telling.

Telling the eyes, not telling the story.

Pure telling.

So he could come at the body when the word 'autopsy' told him that it meant the act of seeing for yourself, which he stretched at once to, the act of seeing with your own eyes. (As in the grand prose-poem by Georg Heym, the autopsy becomes the passive screen on which the poetic vision plays a complex game beyond ordinary meat. Not meat but meant.)

We loved him for hurting, then changing, the way we see. It is a truism by now that Brakhage's one- and two-frame retina-torturing splices led the way to the vital, violent cross-cutting so common in commercials now, when the means of that blaze are easy. Not so back then, the glue-soaked joins of rubbery stock, the scratch of light some younger artists imitate now—about as useful as using black-and-white for flashback in cheapo movies to signify (like Wittgenstein's take on a movement in Schumann's *Davidsbündlertänze*) sheer pastness.

There was that authentic throttle of the hand on the pass of film, the pressure of simple things like fingers and knives.

If that is authenticity, it is an authenticity of means. ("Man at the mercy of his means"—that was the glyph I marked on my brief newsletter *Matter*, printing an early text by Brakhage.) Important to recall that every period authenticates itself by using the means to hand, and what's just barely possible to do. Not by making antiques. Not even antique 16mm art films.

Back to then. We loved him for erasing any pre-existent story, and allowing to come forward only the story that the film/ing edit/ing could tell, could tell by making us see, by letting us know.

Let me know what you see.

Duncan, a master for Brakhage and for me, notoriously could hardly bear watching Brakhage's films, especially the ones after *Anticipation of the Night* that tossed Greek fire onto the eyes.

They hurt my eyes, said Robert Duncan, giggling the way he did when his most elaborate trail of reflection and exposition led him, as it sometimes must, right to something that everybody else knows too. They hurt my eyes.

It hurts to make us see.

The only way (before the interactive arts we now begin to take delight in) that film could reckon with body was, duh, to come at the eyes.

Once I asked Lama Norlha Rinpoche, But what is the self? He immediately and suddenly jabbed his fingers towards my eyes, stopping an inch or so away. I blinked. That blink is the self, he said.

The body then is not something [to be] [re]presented in images, the homeless raptures of pornography, not at all. The body is to be involved in the play, put to work, put to play, via the eyes. The body's work in this art is seeing, seeing with all its limbs and innards and reaches.

And when we're in our bodies we can see with our eyes.

We had to fight to see.

I think this is where the overlap was, Brakhage's work with Duncan, Creeley, me, Olson, all our ten thousand poems, unreadable by the conventions of metric and academic ambiguity, his films unwatchable by the conventional lax attention—come and dream in the movie palace, let the images do their work, lie fallow, citizen—we had been taught, encouraged, to bring to the movies.

Our god (good Hawthorne Americans we still are, praise the lord) is a difficult god. Our god is difficulty itself.

So long before most of us heard about Derrida, Brakhage was seeing, making us see, *sous rature.*

Is that what it was? The superimpositions, the multiple exposures, the A, B, C rolls that let him show and not-show at once, give and withhold, tell and be silent? Overlay, *pli selon pli.*

Brakhage certainly did not pioneer double-exposure; when he was raptly beholding kiddie matinees in midwest movie palaces, already double-exposure was a veteran trick. But conventional double-exposure was always about showing us this plus that. Brakhage's genius lay in showing us this *minus* that *minus* those, and making those subtractions, which became additions, into a complex manifold in which we found ourselves seeing nothing of what had been shot, but only what had been resurrected, multiplied, into seeing. Literally (to use the word that links alchemy, Olson's poetics, and any film) projected.

Anybody can write. A writer is someone with an eraser.

So that the writing of the film might properly be spoken of, and I do speak it, Brakhage wrote (erased) his films. We saw (were denied the sight).

The voyeur of course is always hovering on the verge of rape. There is violence in the act of looking, we hear about it all the time, and it's not just the infamous gaze, the appropriative eyebeam looped around its target/victim, though it is that certainly. The bittersweet fact seems to be that to look is to touch. The eyebeams the Renaissance supposed came forward in the act of seeing and embraced the beheld, the be/held.

We say: it's impolite to stare. We don't say: it's impolite to listen, it's impolite to smell, it's impolite to taste.

Seeing, like touching, is still felt as a palpable gesture interfering with the world of the touched or beheld.

Brakhage not only gives us permission to stare, he demands that we do so. But our stare must become dance, an active gesture, no more a passive gaze. Our stare must dance, a stare-dance, star-dance, the Dog Star Man movelessly struggling up the mountainside, tortured and restrained by colors, images, deliquescences.

Mallarmé was fascinated, especially in his last years, with the visual field in which the poem is inscribed. It is a simple fact that in this apparently linear, successive art, one word after another, one line after another, we do in fact see more than we are reading. Poets are fascinated with these penumbral words that shimmer round the text in ocular focus. It has been said, I don't know on what authority, that Mallarmé actually speculated about inscribing his great final experiment, *Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard*, as a film in that nascent medium, so the words and phrases could scroll by at a controlled rate. Mallarmé and Méliès, what a pair they'd have been. But the book, or a book, won the chance.

I think about that often, and take particular delight in Brakhage's work, who found a new vocabulary, new kinds of words, and inscribed them not just in light (light, light, we hear too much about light), he inscribed them in *time*. The dark of the future—whether coming in ten seconds or ten years—is the medium in which he throws his words on the wall.

No statement ever will use up language.

A year or two ago, thinking of Brakhage and Mallarmé, I became more than ever painfully aware of how a century ago the new art of film was at a crossroads, and we have never deeply pondered the other road film could have taken, how it could have borrowed the trajectory of music, the pre-eminent "*Nacheinander*" (Lessing's term for temporally successive) art, could have enrolled its skills of wielding time under the orders of counterpoint and formal structure. Just as it could have seen—and at times still does see—itself as a fulfillment and renewal of the art of painting, a kind of New Testament of visual art, and dedicated its techniques to the temporal unfolding of 'long paintings.'

We know how film was soon co-opted by the physical spaces in which it needed to be exhibited, and became first a mimicry of the sideshow, then the theatrical exhibition, then an extension of theater itself, and finally a mimicry and fantastically successful embodiment of the things that theater itself extended: fiction, story. Narrative has long been so implicit in our take on films that we have to explain in awkward locutions if we mean any other kind—and even when we do, the hearer imagines us to be talking about documentaries.

It is the achievement of Brakhage, deployed over forty years of passionate film making, to make stand, move, and shine before us some of these other options of film as art. We learn from him best if we continually explore what film could do, what kinds of transactions between mind and location and time, individual and society, public place and private space film can open up. To imitate Brakhage (color, beauty, quickness, edit, fireworks) is to betray him, I think. Because those who do it that way are imitating his style, his smell. Learn from his mind, that formidable art intelligence that knows how to make old things work differently together.

I'm not about to claim that Brakhage has an 'about' and that I know what it is. But I am certain that those who carefully see his films (meditate his films) learn as much about human relations and social arrangements as they might from theatrical or documentary films. His language, subtle with erasures, disclosures, brings the reader of the film (again I insist on the name) right back to the ardent afternoon outside the kiddie matinee or the art house, the street.

Because erasure abolishes the absolute, and lets chance be change.

Film at best returns upon its origins, renews itself in the sheer possibilities of engaging real presence with the structures and rhythms of time, color, shape, resemblance—

and the erasure of those things as well into the frightening, welcoming, restorative darkness.

Brakhage reminds us to ask of film not What happens? or What is the story?—but ask instead, as we ask of music, what happens in us as we watch in real time. And we try to begin investigating the alphabet at least of the language with which this strange music inscribes itself on the wall before us.

Whatever the imagery or visual obsessions may be with which he is blessed or condemned to work, Brakhage is still offering us bracing, necessarily experimental, visions of an autonomous cinema, one in thrall to no other art, telling the eyes. He silences story so we can happen.

These notes amplify and re-order a talk given at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, November 1998, on the occasion of a seminar on Brakhage and the poets. Versions of a few sections were published as a statement of praise when Brakhage received an honorary degree from Bard College in 2000.

MICHAEL McCLURE AND STEVE ANKER

Realm Buster: Stan Brakhage

MICHAEL McCLURE: Stan is a realm buster, and I use "realm" as the word is used in Biology and in Zen. Stan uses his energy and it's almost like moving his shoulders powerfully to break the walls between realms. Some of these realms are the concept of painting, the idea of poetry, the meaning of music, what portrait is, what personal physiology is; other realms that Stan opens up are human and other biology, also the nervous system, ideation—how things are conceived; and then there's the separation between hearing and seeing, sound and silence, and music and sound, which are all explored and more or less brought into one shape in his work. When enough realms are opened, the walls between them torn down or ignored away, then consciousness and concrete experience become one sizeless event in the sizeless event of the Taoist uncarved block which is either the universe or the body, as you see it.

Stan likes to say that he was frustrated in his early desire to be a poet and that his hundreds of hours of film are closer to music than to poetry. I can appreciate that, especially in terms of Messiaen or Vivaldi. I also hear his delight in Madrigals, as much as other music. But Stan derives some of the organicity of his huge body of work from the style and thoughts of some liberated poets of today. I'm thinking of the works of Robert Duncan, as they branch like rivers and streams, one from another, lighting the dark of the night or lighting the dark of the body and mind. There's also the sizeless willingness of Charles Olson's spirit in Stan's films—Olson's willingness to let things break, to let things fall down and go boom, and to trust that they will all land on all fours. Further, there's the sheer trusting experimentality of Gertrude Stein in Stan's work and there's Stan's love of the wry, aesthetic wit and intellective delicacy of Louis Zukofsky.

I first met Stan in 1954, at which point he has described himself as being "the houseboy of Robert Duncan and Jess Collins," meaning by that that he helped them fix meals, do dishes, and slept in the flat below their place. I had just begun to know Robert Duncan and Jess Collins through Robert's first poetry workshop at San Francisco State, which included myself and Helen Adam, a balladeer of the strange and haunted, who was in her girlhood in Scotland called the Fairy Poet. On what was perhaps my first visit to Robert and Jess's San Francisco flat in 1954, Stan came upstairs to visit. My impression was that Stan was inhabiting the floor below Robert and Jess, which was the housing, as I understood it, for the Centaur Press of Kermit Sheets and James Broughton. Stan is the same age as I am, within a few months, and also as I am, Kansas born. When I saw his huge head with dark, tousled hair and intense eyes that were simultaneously focused and staring, I recognized a kindred spirit.

I saw Stan visiting Duncan's lectures at the workshop he was teaching on a number of occasions. Stan was absorbing the energetic principles of the concept of field from Olson via Duncan, and he was taking in the intensely biological shaping-ideas of Robert Duncan and the beautiful, unique concepts of collage of Jess Collins. Stan was a young man who was *sui generis* and coming up as a member of an artist foster family of *sui generis* individuals. Stan's myriad-mindedness is both on the surface and below the surface. Surface-wise, Stan is myriad minded in the art of film, and so busy freeing realms from walls between them, that it's impossible to keep up with him. On the less visible field he is tirelessly investigating not only the arts and history with a voracious love for them, but he's also digging through realms of science—particularly the biology of seeing and the neurochemical anatomy of the nervous system. Stan agrees with Thoreau that, "One must stand up to live before one sits down to write," or to edit film for that matter. And Stan stands up not only with his travels and his varied adventures and family mountain life and film, but also with the large scale of his passions, his happinesses, his pleasures, his modesties. He's fought a battle with the arts just to be the genius that he is and to create his own art of the film. His wars have *not* made him cruel or small minded, but allowed his full generosity to come to scale and to empower him to love and help friends.

STEVE ANKER: I find your idea about Stan being a realm buster very exciting and actually very pointed. Since you mentioned that he feels his art is closest to music, I'm wondering if you think his constant return to poetry—both in terms of specific works of the poets you alluded to, but also in how he uses poetry and central ideas of modern poetry aesthetically in his own work—has a direct correlation to a world of words embodying impulses and ideas as distinct from the world of images?

MM: What I meant to say was that Stan attributes a greater resemblance of his work to music than to poetry. I honor the fact that his work is deeply akin to music, but I feel that it has its roots in, among others, Robert Duncan's poetry, wherein for instance the long serial poem Robert wrote called "Passages" shifts over and becomes another poem and then returns to the streambed of its poemness, and then disappears while he's writing other poems, and then these other poems connect with other poems, creating what people have compared to a tree or a stream, but in fact it's more like the mycelium, the unseen part of the mushroom that brings forth the fruiting body that we think of as the mushroom. It's a tangled, big, unseen, vital presence going on underneath the creativity, which we then see as the flowers of individual *series* or *circuits* of films or as *films themselves.* And then also, one of the things I didn't mention, but you had spoken of earlier, is Stan's relationship to Creeley as an inspiration for some of his vision. Stan speaks well of Creeley's work himself, but I would add that he sees Creeley's *improvisation.* I don't think Stan follows jazz and Creeley has followed jazz, and through Creeley, Stan is inheriting a sense of jazz improvisation which neatly accompanies his sense of Pollock-like improvisation. Also, with Creeley in many of the short, early poems and parts of the later, longer poems, there is an almost hypnogogic imagery following the poem. I know Stan sees that as much as I do when I read Creeley.

SA: One of the aspects of Stan's work which has had the greatest impact, especially in the world of film, is its relation to the dailiness of his own life and how he's able to make use of this through film images. That was radical especially in the beginning, but remains so—in fact may be even more radical now than it was thirty years ago.

MM: I agree completely. I see it as still more radical now. He has gone through what could on one hand be perceived as the ordinariness of life in the home, and then on the other hand, to my way of seeing it, is seeing life in the home, in the family, in the body, with one's pets, with the floor, with the window, as being free of realm—not fitting into the idea of, it is a tree, it is a floor, it is a pet, it is a wife. It *is* a life and it becomes more extraordinary at a time when ways of perceiving in the sciences, as well as in art, are being carved smaller and smaller. I agree with you: it's more extraordinary now. People may have tried to do what Stan is doing, but good luck to them. I hope more of them can. Stan stands there looking more extraordinary as he continues his work, and even more unique.

SA: Stan's art is really about allowing the viewer to have a sense of discovery of even the most mundane elements in life, that there really is a uniqueness to everything, at least as manifested in his films visually.

MM: What I get from Stan is the sizelessness of myself. He views himself in a sizeless way. He sees these things as not having size. By not having size, I mean not having scale. I suppose one could say he sees everything monumentally, but that's not true either, because he also sees some things microscopically. But microscopically and monumentally are beside the point if there isn't any sense of scale. And if there isn't any sense of scale, if there's no proportion, if there is sizelessness, we're free in it. We're free for the first time.

SA: We're especially free from the ordinary and the conventional ways of making sense with our eyes.

MM: Stan is *against* making conventional sense with the eyes. He is committed to it. But it may be because he can't. I mean, this is Stan. This is part of the wonderful thing about it—we're seeing his physiology. He may have made a manifesto out of this, but we're seeing what he does. We're seeing the critter. We're seeing the man there doing what he does.

SA: We're also being given a direct way to experience his kinesthetic sense of moving through the world. I think in addition to the dailiness of his art, which has been so radical going back to the beginning, one of his great achievements is how his work embodies his own particular kinesthetic energy. This is brought out through the rhythms—in a sense, the music—of the flow of his energy. I think that direct comparisons to poetry have to do with repetition, rhythmic gestures, or particular phrasings within each film. I think what's been so remarkable in his work, is his ability to free images—the way that he's able to record elements in his world, free them as images and position them within the flow of his own kinesthetic energy. That's something we're much more used to, recognizing in the worlds of poetry, music, and other time-based art forms.

MM: Unfortunately we don't see it in a lot of poetry. Maybe that's why Stan likes to ally himself with music. Maybe we can see more of it in music. We see it intensely when we see it in poetry, but this is not what we're finding in the recent generation of free-verse poets. Free verse died and there's nothing left that's constructive. There are people doing it, but...well, Stan and I come from the same direction. That's what interests me. He mentions in an interview somewhere finding the article on Jackson Pollock in *Life* magazine in 1948, and what it did to his life, what it did to his world view. There's also what it did to mine. It's different, but we're both coming from the same direction, and my reaction to seeing Pollock in *Life* magazine, was there's something really exciting going on out there. I want out there! I was prepared to the extent that, although I was pretty young, I had seen and was familiar with the Surrealist painters—Dali and Picasso for instance—but Pollock was big news! Soon after that I was becoming initiated into jazz by going to late-night jam sessions. It was in the same manner of experience, although it was different experience. You do get the thought sometimes that all moments are the same moment—the content of them is just different for different people. I felt sometimes like Stan and I were having the same moment. He was having his Jackson Pollock moment; I was having my jazz moment; he was having his Messiaen moment. But also, we were both headed out of Kansas. We had both been born in the year that was the height of the dust bowl and in which soil electrolytes had been stirred to such disturbances, it probably was rare even in the state of Kansas. There was literally energy in the air and energy in the seasons which maintained themselves like that for a couple of decades afterwards, and we were taking that out with us when we left. We had crazy Kansas eyes and crazy Kansas ways of seeing the violence of things that we did see there, as well as the sensitive human crudeness of things. I remember seeing, as I'm sure Stan does, reapers reaping by hand, not by mower. And then I remember seeing people reaping with horse-drawn reapers, and then later the tractor began to come in.

SA: It's fascinating to me that so many remarkable people have come out of Kansas. Do you think that coming from the Midwest, which is relatively flat, by comparison with the mountains of Colorado and the East and West Coasts, has made you guys more sensitive to and responsive to upheavals, including as manifested in art?

MM: I do think that the violence of the weather that we saw in our childhood, which I believe was probably more extreme than it is today, extremes of heat and snow and wind, and in the violence in the people of Kansas, whether it was manifested as bar fights or tent revivals, which we saw a fair amount of in those days, probably quickened sensitivity to emotional whirlings as much as to seeing the mountains or the oceans. In Stan's case he went to the mountains; my case, I went to the ocean.

SA: Could I ask you something about the world of myth, which has always been very central to Stan? Many of the titles of his films reference the worlds of classic mythology, classical thinking and learning, and of course classical art. This has become an increasingly hermetic practice over the last thirty years, and I think at this point in time only rare specialists and poets are actively engaged in the world of myth and the vast numbers of cultures that have added to and referenced this world over the centuries. It's always been interesting to me how much Stan, more than any other filmmaker, recognizes the importance of this, and how much it informs his world. I'm curious how you've thought about that over the years, especially since the world of myth is so much more central to the domain of poetry.

MM: Myth is death, which makes it completely useable for the romantic poets. For instance, take a sonnet of Keats where he braids up a vision out of Dante and the myth of Zeus changing his mistress into a heifer, so that she can escape from the watchful eyes of the hundred-eyed peacock god, Argos. That Keats would take Dante and classic Greco-Roman mythology and mix Dante's vision with that mythology and turn it into an incredibly beautiful and delicate sonnet of his own, shows just how dead myth was in the pre-Victorian Romantic period where myth was being used heavily. You see Blake reinventing myth from ground zero. We see Stan using a myth, but what Stan produces doesn't really have anything to do with the myth, it has to do with what Stan is living when he thinks of that myth.

SA: In one of his earliest writings, Stan says that he is learning to be a transformer. He's learning the magic of transformation and calls himself "a magician."

MM: I think you mentioned that Stan spoke about spells. And when I hear the word "spell," I think of two things: I think of the spells by the old kindred, the pre-Celtic people, the Cruithins of the British Isles, and I also think of the Asian tradition of the spell. One of the forms of the spell is the tantra—pre-Buddhist, and shifting into Buddhism in its early stages there's a period where tantra pours into the infrastructure of Buddhism. Tantra originally meant a ceremony or set of actions or imaginings to change the shape of the universe. I would think of that as being the closest I can think of to a spell, in my life. Over the phone I read Stan the very last of my "Ghost Tantras" as I was writing them. They were spontaneously written, a book of ninety-nine poems in what I call "Beast Language." I'd been writing them for about three or four months and Stan gave me a call—this was in 1962 or '63. Stan called me up from wherever he was. I was back in San Francisco after a trip to Mexico, and I said, "Wait just a minute, Stan," and I finished the last tantra. He waited for a moment and I said, "Here it is, Stanley!" He didn't have any idea what it was or what the "grahhhhrs" were about. Nobody knew I was writing these, and I read him the ninety-ninth tantra in Beast Language. It was the first one to be heard by another person. I'd been hermetic and secretive in the writing.

SA: One of the ways Stan understands his task is that he is making the act of cinema sacred—both in the making, but then of course in the experiencing. And I think what you're describing is the process of a sacred act; it really allows the person a chance for transformation and to recreate their universe.

MM: You're absolutely right. I think that's a beautiful definition of what his work does. To further verify that, I think of the next to the last time I saw a work of his at the Pacific Film Archive, and they had blacked out the exit signs so that it would be as black as the inside of a skull. It was a high level experience and something almost knightly or grail questly about it—particularly for me since they were films I hadn't seen before, and were particularly gorgeous films—the one with the title about the cat and the green worm...

SA: I'd like to ask something concrete: Stan's been making films for about fifty years, and you've been watching films no doubt for most of your life, also well over fifty years. These are the same years in which there's essentially been a revolution in understanding film—not just in the more poetic realms of film, but even in terms of narrative, commercial film. In these years we've had French and many other new waves; we've had a new understanding and redefinition of narrative films, including within the terms of American cinema. I'm curious how your sense of Stan's work has developed alongside and in relation to other forms of film, and how you have continued to see the value of film in the course of your own life over these last fifty years?

MM: Stan is a true alchemist in the sense that I honor, and is a true visionary in the sense that I honor a visionary. I cannot even place his films on the same ground with anything that comes out of Hollywood. I can't make the comparison. Stan and a few other enormously gifted persons ranging from Jack Smith to Bruce Conner to Bruce Baillie to Kenneth Anger created a new art, and I can't see mixing it up, with the narrative film, much less the Hollywood film. My recent experience in seeing *The Cat of the Worm's Green Realm* was one of the deepest—and of course the film was set in a nest of other films of Stan's. It was set in a nest of handpainted films, which were stimulating, like looking at the paintings inside of a Paleolithic cave, except abstract; also slightly reminiscent of the eye visions that you get on hearing Stockhausen's music. But then, to come up with this *Cat of the Worm's Green Realm*! That's wonderful. I felt like when a caterpillar makes its pupa and the being of this maggot-like, worm-like eater of leaves, lovely little thing in itself, melts into a primal substance, in an alchemical process where it is conjoining and introducing mercury and sulfur, and creates a butterfly as a final result. I have seen this process where the pupa has been opened and a glass wall has been inserted in the cocoon. The transformation takes place so that you can see it through glass. I felt as if the same transformation was taking place inside of me, particularly in that film, that I had been melted inside into mercury and that I was transforming and I wasn't going to be the same again afterwards, and I didn't want to be. And it wasn't going to be the biggest thing that ever happened in my life, but it was going to be part of my life. It wasn't going to be a movie that I went to and walked out of, and ho-hum I can't even remember what happened.

SA: One of the things that comes to mind as you speak about this is that Stan's recent films, pretty much all of his hand-colored ones, can seem so slight and can seem in comparison, to melt or blend into one another. But they are in fact so delicate—in the end so very distinct from one another—and I think they can be so easily misunderstood because of their simplicity and their delicacy, that they can be taken for granted. I think as you speak about the caterpillar and the butterfly, you're talking about common insects which seem so second-nature to us all, and yet they are so miraculous. The process of transformation which you describe is also so miraculous, and when this is understood with a renewed appreciation one realizes that it is one of the great aspects of living. But it can be so easily overlooked. I think that that's part the lesson of his later films: that they can seem to be only scratchings, to be only crude, basic, elementary kinds of expressions. But they really demand and in the end offer a unique piece of yourself to have any value. If you allow them to enter yourself, they take up a very special place which I don't think is occupied by anything else of this kind. So it's special—in other words, as simple as they may seem and as seemingly crude as they may seem, they become incredibly precious parts of our beings.

MM: I don't think it could be said better than that. I would like to say, it's wonderful to be able to observe a truly great artist in a new art form working, as perhaps Monet, worked in his old age, and what an enormous pleasure it is, and what an enormous pleasure it is for us to have this conversation.

September 15, 2001

JEAN COCTEAU
(translated by Kristin Prevallet)

L'ANGE HEURTEBISE / THE ANGEL HEURTEBISE

I

The angel Heurtebise, on the stairs
Silken in his wings
Singes me, refreshes my memory
The fool, alone, inept
Here with me, in chalcedony
That is shattered, idiot, by your
Supernatural symmetry.

II

The angel Heurtebise, incredibly
Brutal, sacked me. For grace,
Don't spring so high
Bestial Boy, flower of great
Stature.
I'm in the sack. That's the way
it is. I've had it; take note.
Have you?

III

The angel Heurtebise knocks me down
And you, King Jesus, mercy
Raise me, draw me to the angle
Right of your pointy knees
Pleasure without variety. Fast! Unknot
The chord, I'm dying.

IV

The angel Heurtebise and the angel
Cégeste killed in the war—such an extraordinary
name—playing the part

Of scarecrows
Whose gesture No! scares
Beneath the portals of the church
The cherries of the celestial cherry tree
Accustomed to the jester, Yes.

V

Angel Heurtebise, my guardian angel
I guard you, I hurt you
I shatter you, I change you
Be careful, the hour.
On guard, Spring! I challenge you
If you are a man. Admit
my cerated angel, your beauty.
Pose for a photograph by a
Chemical explosion.

VI

Angel Heurtebise, in robes of water
My loved angel, grace
Has hurt me badly. I am bad
To God, He impales me.
In me the demon is a imp, animal
Once melodious. Arrive
Depart from agate
Pale smoke, oh life that kills.
Beneath your blades diamonds scratch
The mirror of maladies.
The walls
The walls
Have ears
And the mirrors
Are eyes of a lover.

VII

Angel Heurtebise, abound, marrow
Of elderberry airplanes and alabaster linen.
It is time. We must descend

Again with my help, head
First, cross the glass
Without lowering your eyes, the void, the isle
Where the hearth sings. Leave your sword,
Come to me slowly, crazy star.
And if I do not have your body? Ah!
If only we had your hips
Draped with stone, evil
Beast of our God.

VIII

The angel Heurtebise has come
With the feet of an animal, blue as the sky.
I am alone
All naked without Eve, without mustaches
Without maps.
Solomon's bees
fly away, yet I can't eat my honey
My bitter thyme, my Andes honey.
Below, the sea this morning writes
The verb to love one hundred times.
On the grass, cotton angels
The indecent, the filthy ones,
Milk the udders
Of huge geographical cows.

IX

Angel Heurtebise, I triumph
The color, the number 13,
Stroke your white silk
Against the nap
Inflate your wings
In a brand new way.
Never mind about a lesson; I'll learn
by guessing, the affluence
Of the bird, the name
Of every branch on every tree, the bush

Of the month of May.
Bird man, you lost your maize, tamed
Too many statues.
Birds are our friends…
Marble is very influential.

X

Angel Heurtebise, recite the Hail Mary.
One foot upon the imp, the other on
The aisle, it's the juggler with
Plume and cannon ball.
I have had faults, I admit them: ruin the runes
We are on plumes. Angel Heurtebise, the earth
Half-sun, half-shadow is like
A panther in the jungle. NO?
Okay, but I am sure of it and I ordain
You to shut-up. You have blood
in your beak, my young friend.

XI

The Angel Heurtebise, Anjou Street
Sunday, truth or dare
On the roof, hopscotch.
Skipping, fluttering like magpies
Or blackbirds, games with fire
Attention, you say to me.
Heurtebise, my darling
You invalid, they're watching
Us from the right.
Hide your pearls, your scissors
They must not kill you
Or killing you every month
They will kill me and not you.
Angel or liar? Neither. Play—
Fire!
He falls, shot by the soldiers of God.

XII

The death of the angel Heurtebise
Might be the death of an angel, the dead
Heurtebise might be the death of an angle
A dead angel Heurtebise
Mystery of change, a race
That lacks the game, a crime
That the vine entwines, the stock
of the moon, a song from the dying swan.
An other angel replaces him but I
Didn't know his name yesterday or
An hour ago: Cégeste.

XIII

Heurtebise, oh my swan, show me
Your hiding place. The leaf from a vine
Is placed upon your soul.
Brazened, I'll buy it
In the name of the Louvre, whether America
Wants it or not.

XIV

Heurtebise wander
No longer from my soul, I consign.
Do what is needed, beauty.
What is ugly is the happiness we want
What is beautiful is the unhappiness we have.
Hair of angel Heurtebise, heavy
Manly scepter, danger of water
Of milk, the good and bad on guard
Regard this elegant animal
On the moving map: my tomb
On the island of severed fingers.
Unhappiness wears size seven gloves.

XV

Angel Heurtebise, butterflies flutter
Softly in your hands in spite of their nakedness.
The valves and the auricles of the heart
Flower of aorta, anthracite
Hurricane from the cardinal points.
Riggings of the night
The moon listens at the doors.
The rose does not have an age.
She has her beaks, her gloves,
And the newspapers cite her
With the acrobats
Who in night and in day
Exchange without love.

XVI

VERBAL-PROCESS

In the night of... Quay... The angels:
Heurtebise, Elzévir, Sunday, Cégeste
After having...had...the feminine sex...
It appeared...in spite of the hour...
They diverged...diffuse light...soul...
Through the motions of...a wing...in the sleeve
Of iron...on the mouth...the atrocity
Of a gesture.

Led to the stake, they refuse
To explain themselves, listen well.

KRISTIN PREVALLET

Angels in the Apparatus

> . . .all that we call psychological projections are the movies of the angels—
> the home movies of angels are qualities of light held as if in mid air—
> any gathering of dust motes in the light records the passage of angels
> —Stan Brakhage, "Angels" (*EB*, 138)

Jean Cocteau was riding in the elevator up to Pablo Picasso's apartment when the angel Heurtebise appeared to him. Cocteau, devastated by the death of his lover and protégé, the twenty-year-old poet Raymond Radiguet, was high on opium and in a state of hypnogogic hallucination, which he described as "a sleep that seemed interminable but turned out to have lasted half a second." In this moment between waking and sleeping Cocteau heard a voice calling to him, saying, "My name is on the plate!" Jolted awake, he was faced with the brass door-plate of the elevator company. What he saw there, however, was not the actual company logo—the familiar "Otis Pifre" inscription that, with some variation, still brands most of the elevators we all ride everyday. Rather, Cocteau perceived the words "Heurtebise Elevator." His angel—not an aura, not a visitation, not a haloed presence—was simply a voice, and a word. In the days after Heurtebise announced himself, Cocteau fell into a deep depression and was contemplating suicide. But his angel refused to let him go. For seven days he suffered what he described as a kind of "parthenogenesis, a couple made up of a single body that gives birth."[1] That "birth" is the poem "L'Ange Heurtebise." It presumably was dictated by Heurtebise, against Cocteau's will to die.

Stan Brakhage has always been haunted and inspired by the fact that this was the only time the angel actually appeared to Cocteau. At the Boulder Cafe last summer (sitting amidst a heaping pile of 16mm film, paints, and brushes, drinking his signature Irish coffee, and waiting for his steak Caesar), Brakhage told me that it was a testament to Cocteau's genius that he could be inspired by this single visitation across a lifetime of films, plays, poems, and stories. Most people would be anxious to witness another encounter with their angel—to ask it questions about the future, to find out about dead loved ones. But, as Brakhage said, "Cocteau didn't get a lot [from that initial encounter with his angel]—he just got this one poem. A lot of people would say, I need another visitation, I need something else. But Cocteau says no. He is so brilliant because he allows this one encounter to interweave with so much of his aesthetics." Of equal significance to Brakhage is the fact that "an angel can move through something so mundane as an elevator and change your life." If an angel can move through an elevator, then it certainly can move through other mundane apparatuses—including cameras, paintbrushes, and pens. When this happens, the artist falls into a kind of trance, and believes it is the dictating-angel who is ultimately responsible for the creative act.

As a young man, Brakhage thought of himself as a poet. Thanks in part to Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), he realized that film could be an art, and that a filmmaker could also be a kind of poet. Brakhage discovered how film can play on the edge of signification, how it could be more than merely a representation of images that make stories. The poets Brakhage is interested in (who fall under what might be called the Pound/Stein/Olson tradition) maneuver language and affect meaning by catalyzing the connections between sound (*melopoeia*), image (*phanopoiea*), and words (*logopoeia*). Brakhage, a poet-of-film who has remained deeply engaged with the concerns of poetry, realized that film and poetry work in the same way—but use different materials. Brakhage subjects light, color, and visual images to varying states of repetition and pattern that are comparable to the poet's synthesis of sound, image, and words. Light, like words, enables us to see "THROUGH INTO things," as Brakhage writes in a 1964 letter to Yves Kovacs: "The things, as these words are things, will now put forth threads OF illumination entangling the viewer, reader, and each other" (*BS*, 14). Words and light are part of what enables the poet/filmmaker to create works that do not represent the world, but rather go somewhere much more mysterious—into the mind, the soul, the eye, the underworld. They are paths that lead to the edge of what is known; are that which cannot be visualized through the naked eye, but can still be seen.

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[1] Quoted in Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau* (Boston: Nonpareil, 1986), p. 350.

There is a scene in *Orphée* in which the angel Cégeste, working with the beautiful Princess Death to lure the poet Orphée to the underworld, transmits lines of poetry through the radio of a Rolls Royce. Orphée, feeling old and uninspired, spends hours sitting in "the talking car," transcribing Cégeste's mysterious lines of poetry, ultimately publishing them as his own. Moving through a mundane apparatus, the angel inspires the poet to write lines that even he can hardly understand. Orphée in this trance-like state is symbolic of the artist whose true genius is revealed when he abandons his own role in the creative process, becoming nothing more than the medium: the poetry he writes is not his own, but is dictated from some outer realm, some otherworldly source. (The poet Jack Spicer, who like Brakhage also developed theories about how poetry was transmitted from some unknown source, loved this particular scene.) This process, however, is not without consequences. By relieving him of the responsibility of generating his own texts, the process of taking dictation allows the poet an escape from mundanity that is perceived as self-indulgent by those living around him. Orphée was so transfixed by the radio, and so seduced by his own fame, that he cruelly ignores his wife Eurydice and all of the concerns of the real world. As in the Greek myth, the Bacchantes (personified in the film as a group of feminist intellectuals) and jealous poets stone Orphée to death.

Cégeste is not simply the poet's muse—he is collaborating with the love-smitten Death to lure her obsession, Orphée, to the underworld. So the trance-like state of the artist amounts to the artist hovering at the edge of consciousness—coming close, in other words, to dying. "The artist must be in love with death, and loved by death," Brakhage told me. "Death gives the artist back into life... It's crucial that the artist goes into trances which are as terrifying as going to sleep as a kid, fearful of never waking up. The artist survives the trance and out of that comes the work that can live in the world." This journey between worlds, the "mind driven beyond words" which then comes back to relay some trace of another dimension, is what is seen when light flickers through a film, or color takes on a realm of moving depth rarely seen in the land of the living.

In *Orphée*, Heurtebise is Cégeste's older and more experienced counterpart—yet he is lonely and in search of true love. He falls in love with the sad and confused Eurydice, whose agitated and desperate husband spends more time in the car listening to the radio than he does talking with her. After Orphée is stoned to death, Heurtebise leads him through the underworld; when Death sacrifices her own power to send him back home, Heurtebise once again acts as his guide. He gives advice when it is most needed, and calmly listens to Orphée's insane ramblings without judgment. As his annunciation in the elevator would suggest, his role in Orphée's (and in Cocteau's) life is to give a lift, to transport between floors, to make the vertical journey as smooth as possible. He is, in other words, the rower of the boat that goes back and forth across the river Lethe—as comfortable on one side as he is on the other. It is for this reason that he is so useful to the artist: Heurtebise snaps him out of the trance when he has gone too far, and sacrifices his own desire for love and happiness in order to bring the artist back home.

I originally translated this poem at the request of Peter Gizzi who stumbled across it in a bookstore in Paris while doing research for his book on Jack Spicer. (Spicer, as mentioned earlier, invokes Heurtebise in several of his poems, particularly in *Heads of the Town.*) In translating this poem, I had to abandon any notions of evoking the essential "meaning" of the words. The poem depends heavily on wordplay, and its prosody almost defies translation. I opted to work with the references as closely as possible, but in the end, prioritized sound, rhythm, and play over exact "sense." This poem, in other words, is more an adaptation into English than a literal translation. It originally appeared in the first issue (Fall 1994) of *apex of the M*, a magazine I co-edited in the mid-1990s. Brakhage called immediately after he read it to say how much he liked it, and much to my delight has been teaching it in conjunction with *Orphée* ever since. In response to his generous praise, the least I could do would be to try and articulate Brakhage's angels—but ultimately what can be said? After all, he manages to transport them through almost every film he makes.

NATHANIEL DORSKY

Stan Brakhage: Four Silent Nights

Although American avant-gardist Stan Brakhage has achieved a level of expression comparable with more known contemplative filmmakers such as Ozu or Antonioni, he has remained a marginal figure. Greatness sometimes takes longer than artistic fashion will allow. By the time that Brakhage, who has been making films since 1952, began to make his most deeply felt and profoundly elegant visual work, he had virtually lost his audience. During the last fourteen years, interspersed among a variety of ventures into sound filmmaking, Brakhage has produced a body of silent work of fragile beauty that directly address our need for an intimate, tender, and prayerful cinema.

This work, which we bring together on four nights during July, leaves behind the director's previous concerns with myth and family and centers on an upstream area of poetic exploration closest to the pinpoint of mind where light, spirit, and body come upon one another. Cinema so rarely touches upon this "original place" that the viewer's only difficulty might be in trying to "read" these films—to conceptualize them into a literary film language—and therefore miss the joy of their direct and passionate play upon our metabolism. *Seeing* them is the key; the door of their revelation is the door through which we remember dreams.

The power of these works comes from an astute presence of mind, a presence in love with reality, which allows the mystery of the present to bloom in the audience. The plasticity of cinema is the main character, the tensions those of painting and music. Surface, color, rhythm, and image become in themselves the purity of our experience. The "story" or intelligence rests on the surface of the eye. We are not witnessing mere avant-gardism, but whole-hearted expressions of being.

First published in the *University Art Museum Newspaper* of UC-Berkeley (July-August, 1994) to announce a program at the Pacific Film Archive that included the *Arabic, Babylon,* and *Egyptian* series, as well as *The Loom* and *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea.*

JENNIFER REEVES

Argument for the Immediate Sensuous: Notes on *Stately Mansions Did Decree* and *Coupling*

Brakhage's films delight and incite with a restless, unadulterated visual magnificence. Expanding the language of light, color, and visual rhythm, he takes film far beyond its usual bondage to representation and story telling. From his stomach-turning yet vital film document of autopsies, *The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes* (1971) to his abstract and sumptuous hand-painted *Persian Series* (1990s), Brakhage's works uproot established and comfortable ways of seeing. In all their manifestations, Brakhage's films call for active participation and openness from viewers, and in turn they teach us about our relation to time and perception, and introduce us to new forms of pleasure.

A few years ago Brakhage put it this way: "Much of my life's work constitutes an attempt to subvert the representational photography IS by creating a sense of constant present tense in each film's every instant of viewing" (*EB*, 210). Brakhage's hand-painted films are a case in point, in that they demand to be experienced in a succession of immediate visual moments. In a five-minute film he paints and projects thousands of 16mm film frames, and though each film has its own palette and a predominant texture (inspiration), every frame is distinct, abstract and separate. Brakhage hints at solid forms, but no particular image is ever animated into coherent motion as in traditional animation. Each painting flies by at a fraction of a second, so the viewer can never "catch up" with seeing and holding all the enlarged single frames Brakhage projects to us from the screen. This multitude of disappearing paintings creates an immediate sensual experience for viewers.

In *Immediate Stages of the Erotic*, a study of music and the sensuous erotic in human nature, Kierkegaard inadvertently illuminates an essential quality of Brakhage's hand-painted films when describing Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*:

> The genius of sensuousness is hence the absolute subject of music. In its very essence sensuousness is absolutely lyrical, and in music it breaks forth in all its lyrical impatience. It is, namely, spiritually determined, and is, therefore, force, life, movement, constant unrest, perpetual succession; but this unrest, this succession, does not enrich it, it remains always the same, it does not unfold itself, but it storms uninterruptedly forward as if in a single breath. If I desired to characterize this lyrical quality by a single predicate, I should say: it *sounds*; and this brings me back again to sensuous genius as that which in its immediacy manifests itself in music.[1]

Kierkegaard declared that "sensuous-erotic genius demands expression in all its immediacy," and he concluded that music was the only medium appropriate for the purpose (and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* the most perfect rendering). But many years later Film was born, "stepchild of Song and Light," and today Stan Brakhage is making films which "storm uninterruptedly forward" in lush luminescent music. It is the orchestration of colors, painted textures, composition, and visual tempo that constitutes the life of each work. And, though Brakhage's films are technically silent, indeed they "sound" in their "perpetual succession" and "constant unrest."

For all the pleasure Brakhage's painted films can deliver, they also arouse a heightened awareness of color, texture, and detail, and compel the viewer to reflect on her own thought processes. Viewers can become so hyper-aware watching that they can catch themselves spectatoring—watching the self watch (even at the cost of true engagement with) the film. The films' multi-layered effects can be so overwhelming that viewers, unable to hold onto anything familiar, might seek control through objectifying the process, guessing at technique or content: "Do I see bodies? Thighs? Was that double-exposed or just layers upon layers of paint?" First-time viewers may rebel in frustration. Even seasoned avant-garde film goers can find themselves in that unfortunate place of seeking something know-able to affirm that one's abilities to perceive can contend with the dominant beauty of the film's unfolding. But one must humble oneself to (meet) pleasure. When you think too much, you miss the sensuous beauty of it.

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[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. David F. and Lillian M. Swensen, (Princeton UP, 1959), vol. I, p. 70 (original italics).

Watching *Stately Mansions Did Decree* and *Coupling* during a Brakhage screening at Millennium in New York last year, I just felt lucky to be sitting there, taking them in, and content that I couldn't tell my friends about the films, as my descriptions would be quite futile. When later I was asked if I'd like to write about Brakhage my first reaction was: can I make a film instead? But that would have been cheating since I already had. Shortly after seeing those films I started painting *Fear of Blushing*, responding to the works and affirming Brakhage's talk on permissions. He spoke to the audience at that screening about the essential dialogue between works and between artists. Some quality or light in the work of one filmmaker will inspire and open a door permitting another to continue to push forward with their own work. This was the gift these films gave to me.

STATELY MANSIONS DID DECREE (1999, 7 mins) begins with silvery gray, cloud-like masses, inscribed by paint in black, blue, yellow, turquoise, green, white, red. There are too many colors to pin down a palette, but they have a common vividness and density. Soft and sharp shapes intermix in rapid fluctuating rhythm while colors puncture and punctuate a two-dimensional surface, which burns instantaneously in and out of view. Soon there seems to be a form splitting the picture's center, but it is barely perceptible. Is the viewer simply looking for a backbone for the film—a vertical horizon? Or is this the doorway leading to the interior of this mansion/pleasure-dome/film? (The title refers to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," which begins, "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree.")

Bright silvery gray returns and is joined by pinks and blues. The viewer looks for patterns: swirling rectangular currents of painted fire? The texture of brush strokes and fallen bristles are revealed more clearly as the film progresses (or have the viewer's eyes quickened enough to discern a stray hair?). Emphasized is the two-dimensional surface of film, likening it to the paper upon which great ideas and visions become.

It is entirely satisfying to be lost and found in the barrage of rich colors and evolving rhythm, yet one could get wary trying to behold forms or a compositional structure. Conventional logic, the desire to possess, cannot be imposed on this beauty. The absolute, sensuous splendor here is elusive. And this effect echoes Brakhage's comments on the film (in conversation) where he sees, "a sense of history written in fire on parchment, castles and interiors built up and burnt down, the life of an idea in medieval times." Though *Stately Mansions Did Decree* elucidates its various inspirations (which include Coleridge's poem and J.M.W. Turner's Petworth Park watercolors) Brakhage's film is vital and complete in itself, never illustrating these works concretely. The viewer may not see parchment, though she senses a two-dimensional surface alive with color and movement. Painted images become and dissolve as immediately as the interrupted idea loses its force (just as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" was interrupted by the "man from Porlock").

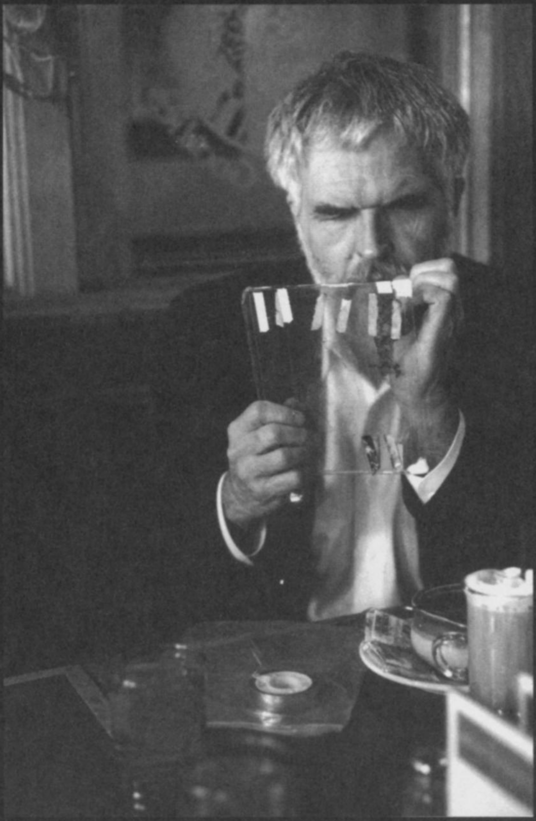
There is a harmony between improvisation (the magic in Brakhage's action painting) and a mindful scoring of elements (in re-photographing the frames for viewing) in *Stately Mansions*, as in much of his other hand-painted work. Brakhage uses the optical-printer lens to illuminate his film paintings as sharp or soft, three-dimensional pigment or two-dimensional surface, shadow or highlight. And then the printer becomes his instrument for improvising visual music. Painted frames speed by at intricate and varying rhythms (combinations of step-printing rates), so the viewer is invited to sit back and feel each individual moment or burst of light and color without a shadow of anticipation. Floating in a sea of color, we are supported but not forewarned of the next instant of rocking and swelling. The crests of waves are not perfectly matched, but the breathing of the sea and the urging towards voluptuousness has its worth in being, not in meaning. Overall weight and velocity balance, while never being mechanical. During brief periods when a steady visual rhythm is perceptible, the stability in tempo allows the viewer to focus more carefully on subtle textural change and fleeting color-bursts, which have no other anchor. The waves of images hold the viewer in that continual present tense.

COUPLING (1999, 5 mins [see plates 3-6]) emerges with a black background (the beyond), while in the foreground gray three-dimensional forms engage in a vanishing dance. Vibrant red, green, turquoise, yellow, and orange are all-surrounding and seem to be scraped or as if scrawled with crayon. Frames are primarily filled in red, like blood swollen flesh. Soft focus photographic images come briefly through the painting but never give way to representation. Could this be pixilated film footage of dancers or lovers, buried in the painted oblivion? The mind can wonder but never know.

All at once: tactile colors condense or break apart like lava. Long limb-like forms from one frame leave their touch upon the next. Irregular, highlighted shapes are framed by rhythmic splatters of color and shadow. Painted images, continually replaced by hundreds more, are fluid on top of each other. There is always the past in present at any moment as the dark background holds an afterimage of forms that were there before.

I fear that all this verbiage goes against the film's purpose for existing, but at the same time I realize the desire to absorb its entirety is quite natural. How can a person surrender to this mystical, gorgeous film and not be greedy about it? In introducing *Coupling*, Brakhage had indeed said something about greediness. Part of his inspiration for the film was that wish to see ALL of it, even the insides of organs, moving and flowing in the act of loving and coupling. Brakhage's film is a tender, intimate, and unabashed offering, so its visual phenomena bring to life the inspiration.

After viewing *Coupling* ten times it still makes me crazy, which means that I'm in love with this film, the shameless excess of it. I wonder if other viewers also feel this thrill and I'm almost jealous of them partaking in this cinematic flesh. Reflection, like jealousy, is self-inflicted and spoils the rapture of passion. One moment I look at color and the next I think about shape. I pay attention to texture and then I focus on rhythm or composition. So much occurs in the immediate, it is absurd to separate all these elements (who tries to taste flour in the cake?). I blink my eyes to capture the single frame afterimages on my closed eyelids. But then I'm distressed for missing too much while trying to hold onto one visual moment. So much occurs and disappears instantaneously one should surrender to the pleasure and beauty of the film's unfolding, as with a lover. If you are continuously aware of this arm and that limb (this technique, that touch, this texture) how can you love the being? How can you happen upon bliss? Hesitating to name what you enjoy turns enjoyment into the anxiety of losing what you've named. Abandon is necessary. Viewer, please say, "I surrender."



Brakhage in Boston, 1995.
Photo by Robert A. Haller.